THE STAMPEDER

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"Rex gazed into the rolling eyes, the wild, distorted visage of the Corsican, and felt himself shoved to the very brink of the crevasse." Page 173.]

THE

STAMPEDER

BY

S. A. WHITE

ILLUSTRATED

TORONTO
WILLIAM BRIGGS
1910

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ILLUSTRATIONS

"Rex gazed into the rolling eyes, the wild, distorted visage of the Corsican, and felt himself shoved to the very brink of the crevasse". . . . . *Frontispiece*

"The two teams raced side by side, the leaders snapping at each other"

"From the Indian's extended palm the yellow flash of native gold filled Britton's startled eyes"

THE STAMPEDER

CHAPTER I.

Britton's steam-yacht tore out its lungs in protest at the black smudge of a coasting vessel reeling straight across its bows.

The siren bellowed thrice in a choking fury of warning and denunciation till the echoes boomed over the Algerian harbor and floated high up to the Mustapha Supérieure, where English lords slept at peace in luxurious hotels.

Disconcerted by this tremendous volume of sound, the coaster vacillated, veered and yawed as if under some drunken steering-hand, to leap forward unwarily and bury her weather-beaten prow in the white side of the *Mottisfont*.

The terrific impact swept the yacht's forecastle clear of snoring sailors, and, after shooting the temporary owner headlong from his berth, commenced to polish the companionway passage with his features, an operation which he instinctively though not wholly wakefully resented by a frantic grasping for something substantial.

The effort was rewarded when his fingers clutched the lower stairs, and Rex Britton staggered to his feet. Every light below was out, and the man so roughly aroused stood dazedly wondering if a horribly real nightmare held him in its grip.

Then, like a flash, intelligence permeated his shaken brain, and all the faculties stirred again. He remembered the grinding crash and clambered on deck in his pyjamas!

Upon the bridge loomed the figure of the captain, frantically banging at the engine-room signals, but the bell refused to sound. A medley of curses vibrated in the humid night air, emanating partly from the lower deck, and partly from the bows of the coaster as the Berber sailors gave free vent to their displeasure.

"Daniels–Captain Daniels!" roared Britton, "what the deuce is this turmoil?"

"An accident, sir," was the reply. "A coasting vessel has rammed us. I'm afraid we're badly hit; and the signals are out of business. We'll reverse in a moment if the engines are not disabled."

He waved a sailor down with the order to the engine-room. The big yacht trembled under the mighty strain and began to creep backward, inches at a time, since the nose of the other craft was tightly wedged in its vitals.

Britton was beside the captain in a moment, with a perfect stream of ques-

tions as to details and responsibility.

"The coasting steamer was entirely at fault, sir." Daniels gravely assured him. "She cut across our bow in spite of three warnings. Judging by her careening, the wheelsman was very drunk!"

An increased throbbing of the *Mottisfont's* engines made the whole hull shiver, and the yacht scuttled backward from the coaster like an immense crab.

"She sinks! she sinks!" rose the cry from the sailors on the poop.

"What is sinking?" cried Britton, excitedly; "not the yacht!"

"No, the coaster," said Captain Daniels. "She has no water-tight compartments."

The terrified wail of the Arab crew proclaimed the inrush of the water as the steamer listed at an alarming rate to starboard. The officers shouted orders which were smothered in the tumult, for an uncontrollable panic seized passengers and sailors. Pandemonium in its wild, selfish authority ruled on the coaster's decks, and Britton, from the bridge of the *Mottisfont*, could view the mad, strenuous struggle for safety. A feminine cry startled him in its piercing shrillness.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed, "there are women there, and those brutes of Berbers will trample them to death. Quick, man! Drive the yacht in close and throw out the ropes."

Daniels instantly obeyed, observing: "It's dangerous work, sir, and she's liable to drag us down when she founders, which may be any moment now!"

"Doesn't matter," said Britton, curtly. "We're bound to help them even if this was their own doing. Have you lowered the launch?"

"Mr. Ainsworth and Mr. Trascott have it, sir."

"The smaller boats?"

"They're out, sir, trying to take some of the passengers off. Why in the name of Neptune don't they lower their own?"

The *Mottisfont* was larger than the steamer, and overtopped it as they drew in again. Britton leaned forward and listened to the tumult on the smaller vessel.

"I'm afraid they're fighting for their own boats," he said, quickly. "The panic's getting worse."

The hubbub was redoubled. A woman's scream, sharp and piteous, was cast despairingly on the night. Britton muttered something like an oath, and swinging down from the bridge he ran forward with all speed.

"Anyone in the turret?" he yelled to the group of sailors straining on the ropes.

"No, sir," answered the first mate. "The lookout was thrown to the deck when we struck. His shoulder is broken."

"Go up yourself," ordered Britton. "See if the searchlight works, and turn it on the coaster. We are only groping like blind men in the dark."

Turning to the second mate, he added: "Fire that brass cannon at intervals to call out the harbor boats. I see the usefulness of it after all!"

Leaving the mates to execute his orders, Britton sprang to the taffrail and vaulted at hazard down into the struggling mass of humanity that surged over the steamer's forehold. He landed squarely upon an Arab's back, knocking that swarthy individual into the lee scuppers, but without pausing to unravel the puzzling Algerian profanity which was thus elicited, Britton pushed his way aft.

He could feel the vessel rock to the roll of the water in the hold as the weight above was continually and suddenly shifted, and he knew that with one of those evolutions she would roll a little too far. There would be no recovery, and the steamer would turn turtle.

About the stern-davits a struggle raged. The forward boats were stove in with the force of the collision, and only four were left intact. The brown-skinned Berber sailors endeavored to lower them, and blue-coated officers vainly attempted to keep them back and to preserve order among the demented people.

One boat got away as Britton came up. The yacht's searchlight, pricking out of the gloom, showed the craft to be full of Arabs, while women and children were wailing in supreme terror upon the foundering vessel.

The crowd swayed to the rail as another boat was slung from the davits. Rex grasped the arm of a man in marine uniform.

"Where's your captain?" he demanded, harshly.

"I am the captain," said the man, helplessly; "but what can I do? The passengers have gone mad! The Berbers are beasts!"

Britton flung aside the arm he had seized with a gesture of repulsion.

"Do?" he cried, in fine scorn. "You might at least try! You act like a baby. This rush must be stopped–"

Boom! rang the *Mottisfont's* cannon. Its message reverberated like hollow thunder over the great bay. Two score whistles rose in answer from the inner reaches of the harbor.

Boom! The whistles shrieked anew, and the riding lights of the vessels plunged into activity.

"You hear!" exclaimed Britton. "If that rush isn't stopped half of those on board will be drowned by the swamping of the boats, with a hundred harbor craft coming to the rescue. Come on, sir–be a man!"

Rex took hold of a heavy piece of broken stanchion and made a flying leap into the knot of Berbers stamping about the stern davits.

"Back, men!" he shouted in a voice that soared above every other noise. "Be calm! There'll be a hundred boats here in a minute, with room for all of you. Let the women forward at once!"

A female figure sprang to the davits at his words, but the Arabs roared their

dissent and charged in a body. Britton had a vision of a girlish form with an ethereal face and pale-gold hair, tossed rudely in the rush of men. She lost her footing suddenly and went down with a suppressed scream.

Snarling like an enraged animal, Rex leaped in front of them.

Crack! sounded his stanchion on the foremost head. Crack! crack! He pierced their ranks and dragged out the luckless woman. Shielding her with one arm, he was carried back against the ship's side by the pressure of the frantic throng.

"Are you hurt?" he found time to whisper.

"No–only frightened," she sobbed. The nervous strain was too much for her.

Britton made her kneel down under the rail behind him, and, with his legs protecting her from the trampling, he faced the angry Arabs again.

They had hesitated a little, daunted by the impetuosity of his attack. The Englishman's blood was now thoroughly aroused. Away back in his line of ancestors there had been knights of the old regime; there were soldiers of the empire among the later generations; and his grandfather had fallen at Waterloo. The fighting, bulldog strain was in him, and only sufficient baiting was required to bring it into evidence!

Boom! sounded the *Mottisfont's* cannon for the third time. Across the mysterious stretch of bay the shout of rowers answered.

"They're coming!" exclaimed Britton, triumphantly. "You pack of fools, have you no sense?"

A growl was the reply. Whether fear had driven out their understanding, or whether the rough fellows were actuated by a desire of revenge for the blows inflicted by the Englishman, they rushed upon him once more.

"Ah! you will have it, will you?" he cried, exulting in the mere thrill of battle. "Then lay on, you rabble!"

He stood in the central focus of the steam-yacht's searchlight, with muscle action unhampered and with bare feet gripping the deck firmly, while his enemies strove to reach him. His stanchion rose and fell like a flash as he circled in and out, avoiding the blows of his adversaries, and every time he struck a man went down. Once a sinewed Moroccan locked with him, and he felt the sting of steel in his shoulder, but a jolt on the fellow's neck from Britton's other arm stretched him senseless, while the knife clattered over the rail into the sea.

Crack! crack! The sound of his club grew monotonous; the soft, warm trickle of something down his left shoulder filled him with a strange disgust for the combat; he felt ashamed of himself standing in pyjamas on the lighted deck of another ship and striking down Berbers with a stanchion.

Since it was wholly necessary, the Englishman wondered at the sense of shame. Perhaps it was an odd trick which the wounded nerves in his arm were

playing him.

Only three or four Arabs opposed Britton now. He ran at them with hands placed wide on his stanchion, like a wand, and swept them aside. The captain of the steamer stepped through into the cleared space on the after-deck.

"Give your orders," said Britton, with a sigh of relief.

He turned to the woman by the rail and raised her up as the feminine contingent was passed to the side and lowered into the harbor boats which were already alongside.

"You may enter one of them now," he said, marvelling vaguely at her perfect face. She touched his arm with a movement of gratitude, but her fingers came away wet and sticky.

"Someone slashed you!" she exclaimed in concern. "Let me see. Oh, let me bandage it. And I was the cause of your wound!"

"It is only a flesh wound–" began Britton.

"Madam, the boat!" interrupted the anxious captain.

"I'll wait," answered the woman. "This man is wounded–the man who saved all of us. Can't you do something? See! he's weak!"

She gave an alarmed cry as the Englishman staggered. He saved himself by clutching the rail.

"It must–have been those–those circles I cut among the rascals," he laughed unsteadily. "They make me dizzy."

"You're evading," she said quickly; "it's the Berber's knife."

With a strong effort Britton summoned his will-power to control his weakened nerves, and roughly dashed a hand across his eyes. It was with a great sensation of relief that he felt his returning steadiness of muscle, and he glanced at the rope ladders which filled the waiting boats with fleeing people.

"We had better be getting down," he advised. "The steamer will not float long."

Even as he spoke, the coaster lurched alarmingly. Rex grasped the woman's arm and drew her quickly to the rail.

A thrown rope whipped his cheek, and he caught it skilfully, peering below at a small boat which swayed to the roll of the steamer.

"For God's sake, Britton, come off that old hulk," shouted someone. "She's sinking fast!"

Rex looked downward with the pleased expression on his own face contrasting strangely with the anxious countenances of the two occupants of the launch.

"It's my friends, Ainsworth and Trascott, from the yacht," he explained to the woman at his side.

"I was beginning to wonder why they hadn't showed up. You see they must have been out before I awakened, for they had taken the launch to the rescue."

"Come off!" commanded Ainsworth, peremptorily. "Can't you see you're last, you two mooning fools? The old coffin will drop in a minute."

They could hear Trascott's mild protest at Ainsworth's trenchant phrasing of the situation, and Britton laughed.

"Trascott's a curate," he said, disengaging a rope ladder for their own use, "a very orthodox, English curate! Sometimes he doesn't approve of his friend's strenuous speech. You'll have to overlook it, though. Ainsworth is a lawyer, and he thinks he has us in the witness-box."

They were descending the rope-ladder as he spoke, the lady going first, and Cyril Ainsworth heard the last part of his host's comment.

"It's no witness-box you're in, Britton," he growled. "It's a bally old tub, and you needn't think because you're dressed in beautiful, silk pyjamas that you must stay there till you have to swim. If I were the lady, I would vigorously object to getting wet."

Ainsworth emphasized his tirade with a swift revolution of the engine-crank. The curate cast off the rope, and they puffed away from the water-logged vessel. Gleaming white against the inky color of her side was the name-plate–*Constantine*.

Britton pulled an overcoat and a pair of sea-boots from a locker and put them on.

"That's better," grunted the lawyer. "You don't look so much like a posing matinee idol in crimson jersey and biceps!"

Britton apparently did not hear him, being intent upon the dénouement of this harbor tragedy. Under the *Mottisfont's* powerful search-light everything stood out nakedly clear for rods around. The stricken vessel rolled in a last, pitiful struggle, listed too far for the recovery of her equilibrium, turned turtle and sank like a stone.

"There's the end of incompetence," rasped Ainsworth, while the lady beside Britton gave a sympathetic cry, and the fleet of boats flying from the vortex peril with their human cargoes echoed in choruses of dismay.

"Had you friends?" Britton asked of the woman.

"No,–only my maid and baggage," she answered. "My name is Morris, Maud Morris–and I was travelling alone."

"To Algiers?"

"Yes, to Algiers–at least temporarily."

"Then the inconvenience is not considerable," Britton said. "We will go on board the yacht, and I can find your maid in the morning."

"Ah! you are too generous," murmured the lady. "You have already done more than a woman can repay, and I have not even attended to your wound. Does it pain much?"

"Very little," replied Britton, lightly. "I believe I shall hold you to your promise to bandage it, and I believe it will get well very soon."

She laughed a low, sweet laugh which harmonized with her pale beauty, and Britton felt some unexplained fascination as her green-blue eyes held his.

The launch bumped the *Mottisfont's* side abaft of the great hole which the *Constantine's* prow had torn. The occupants surveyed the black, yawning break somewhat ruefully before they stepped on deck.

"What the deuce will the Honorable Oliver Britton say when he finds his nephew has smashed up his floating palace?" asked Ainsworth, meditatively.

"My honorable uncle will never see it till it is restored to its original state," Rex answered. "And the Moroccan Steamship Company, owners of the *Constantine*, will pay for the restoration."

"What a legal beacon you might have been!" sighed Cyril, generously. "But this pin-scratch they gave you in the arm!––who pays the doctor-bill?"

"That is my affair," said the lady of the adventure, very sweetly, "and it is time it was given attention." She took Britton's sleeve and drew him to the companionway. There Rex paused and hailed the bridge.

"Daniels, get us in close to the eastern jetty at once and anchor there. We don't know how badly we're damaged, so moor right under it."

"Aye, aye, sir," the captain answered.

"And send me the steward," Britton added.

"Here he is, sir! Bannon, go forward."

The portly form of the steward joined the two by the stairs.

"Bannon, have your wife prepare a stateroom for Miss Morris at once," said Britton, "and bring us some linen strips for bandages."

"You're hurt, sir?" said the steward.

"Only scratched! Water and linen is all I want."

Bannon brought it as directed, and having given the simple necessaries to the lady, Britton dived below to reappear some minutes later in yachting trousers, shirt and shoes, with his left sleeve rolled up to the shoulder and his duck coat on his other arm. He had washed the knife-wound while in his bath-room, but it bled afresh, and the lady hastened to staunch it.

Trascott assisted her by the use of much cold water. When the flow of blood was stopped, she called into requisition some healing ointment which Bannon had brought on his own authority and then bound the limb neatly with linen. There was something exquisite in the sensation for Britton. The soft touch of her fingers, the near fragrance of her person and the electric glow of awakened sympathy combined to influence him and awake strange thrills to which he was not at all subject.

She felt the throb of his pulse as she held his wrist down to straighten the

bandage, and the knowledge of its origin flushed her cheek. An instant she looked up at him inquiringly, almost with the spirit of challenge, but her lashes drooped under the tensity of his glance.

Virility was Britton's most salient attribute. When the man in him was stirred, it moved strongly, and the proximity of so fair a vision would have excited a less impressionable person, one with less of Britton's youthful and unbounded faith in women!

The steward disappeared about his business. Trascott and Ainsworth loitered away. Britton and the woman were left alone with that magnetic bond of touch binding them. With the man, the impression lasted for many a day! A new, uncurbed power was loosed within him, and the woman felt the trend of its might. It thrilled and awed at the same time. She shifted her hands to a final arrangement of the bandage.

"I think it will do," she murmured in a confused way.

Britton shook himself out of a wild dream, slowly fastened his shirt-sleeve and donned his coat.

"We will go below," he said, taking her arm and guiding her down the companionway. The stewardess met them in the passage and led the way to the stateroom she had prepared, disappearing therein.

"Good-night," she said, extending both hands. "I haven't found much opportunity to thank you. To-morrow I shall tell you more."

Britton took her fingers, and the mad blood leaped in his veins again.

"To-morrow," he cried gladly. "Ah! yes, there are many to-morrows, for you stay at Algiers."

"Many to-morrows!" she exclaimed with a happy laugh, as she turned into the stateroom. "That is a sweet way of putting it. Many to-morrows!–I like that idea."

CHAPTER II.

"It's hell,–isn't it, Trascott?" asked Ainsworth, dismally.

"My dear fellow," protested the shocked curate, "such liberty of expression, to put it mildly–"

"Fudge!" interrupted his friend. "You divines all agree as to the existence of an infernal region. Why shouldn't I introduce a comparison if I choose? If

you don't like its rugged exterior you can at least appreciate the sentiment. It's hell–isn't it?"

"Well, well, it's decidedly unpleasant," grumbled Trascott.

"It's a bally shame!" said the lawyer, tritely. "Britton takes us away on his uncle's yacht for a cruise of the African shore of the Mediterranean. Witness our cruise! We get as far as Algiers and there his two long-suffering comrades have to stagnate while he plays the gallant to a blonde will-o'-the-wisp whom he made a show of rescuing. He found her maid, installed her at the Hotel de ––, attended to her remittances from England in her stranded position and played the modern hero role to a triple curtain call–which he is certainly getting!"

"Of course the yacht had to be repaired," put in Trascott, as if it was his kindly duty to find some extenuation.

"Of course!" echoed Ainsworth sarcastically, waving a hand to where the *Mottisfont*, quite intact, rode proudly at anchor.

The two men were standing on the harbor piers above the landing-stages, and they had a good view of the vessel. Behind them the capital of Algeria rose precipitously up the sides of an immense hill a mile in length at the base by five hundred feet in height. The foot of the picturesque city was the sprawling sea; the head was the Casbah, the ancient fortress of the Deys. Up on the hill reposed the old or high town with its quaint Moorish edifices, while sloping below to the rim of the port lay the lower, new, or French town filled with government buildings, squares and streets, together with lines of warehouses and wharves, dotted here and there by mosques that looked strangely out of place amid the European architecture.

Blocked out against the harbor water from their conspicuous stand, the two friends were very dissimilar in appearance. Ainsworth's was the short, squat figure, Trascott's the tall, lanky one. The lawyer, in spite of the disadvantage of height, probably weighed more than the curate. His stockily-built body filled out his gray tweeds, while the black garments of Trascott hung loosely on his hollow frame. A gray cap of the same material as his suit was jauntily perched on the lawyer's head, but his companion wore the familiar and inevitable round, dark hat.

Still, if Trascott's form lost dignity beside Ainsworth's, that dignity was more than regained when it came to a comparison of faces. The lawyer had a gray-eyed, regular countenance, smooth and unmarked by any dissipation, but it lacked the shading that beautified his friend's. The curate's features, though more rugged in casting, had the high lights of earnestness glowing in his brown eyes, the deeper tones of endeavor blending in the moulding of the chin, while the shadows of responsibility rested in the firm curve of his lips.

Cyril Ainsworth, with his unchanging mask of precision, was the keen, well-

oiled machine which cut straight to the core of things in the performance of its work. Bertrand Trascott was the living actor of a great belief, the exponent of a mighty drama calculated to uplift and regenerate his fellow-beings. Each had his part in the work of the present-day world, and, strange to say, men loved the machine-like precision of Ainsworth almost as well as the generous heart of Trascott.

The lawyer again called the curate's attention to the yacht with another motion of his hand.

"The yacht had to be repaired," he snapped. "It took three days to splice the timbers and rivet the plates. We should then have proceeded with our cruise. There was no impediment, for the steamship company settled the damages in full. Yet here we have been for two weeks–and so has the woman! At this rate we may be here for two months–and so may the woman!"

They sat down upon the piers for their after-supper smoke, having fared sumptuously on board the *Mottisfont*, in an effort to reconcile themselves to the inertia under which they chafed. The soft dusk began to glide in from the sea and enfold the dark wharves in misty wreaths. One by one the riding lanterns of the harbor vessels shone out like stars in a fog, and the rhythm of an Arab sailor song came swelling over the broad bay.

The two friends smoked in silence as the dusk grew deeper. Presently the beacon light flashed up on Matifou ten miles away, sending out its nightly warning to the ships at sea. A thousand lamps flared in the lower town, and far up the hill the boulevard lanterns starred the gloom with their fiery eyes.

"Can you tell me the space of time an Algerian romance requires?" asked Ainsworth, finally.

Trascott's cheery laugh was the only answer.

"In England," the lawyer mused, "I would give them six weeks. In this southern climate, where the blood runs hot, the climax must come in less time, but just how long only Britton knows."

Trascott tapped his pipe upon the pier, refilled it and settled back with a sigh.

"Do you think this affair is really serious?" he asked, with a certain earnestness and anxiety.

"Serious!" Ainsworth snorted, "it's the most serious thing that ever happened him. Do you understand Britton's disposition? He's a whole-hearted fellow full of generous and chivalric impulses, with a belief in the goodness of all the feminine sex. He has run against nothing to knock those notions into chaos. Do you think he can view that fine-looking woman unmoved? Do you think that she is going to pass by Reginald Britton, the heir to Britton Hall and old Oliver's estates? Not if I know anything, Trascott! And mark me, I don't like the woman.

She's fair enough for a lord–but I don't like her. Please remember that, Trascott."

The curate started, for he had earlier confessed to himself a similar dislike of the blonde beauty who had taken the yacht and Britton and the port itself, as well as the great English hotels, by storm. However, he was too fair-minded not to combat such an antipathy so far unwarranted.

"Why do you not like her?" he asked, seeking perhaps in Ainsworth's attitude a solution of his own state of mind.

"Intuition, I suppose," the lawyer answered gruffly. "When I see a lady travelling alone, except for her maid, coming apparently from nowhere and heading for a destination wholly indefinite, I always regard her with suspicion. What has Britton learned about this woman? He knows her name is Maud Morris. He knows she can madden him with those eyes and lips. That is the extent of his knowledge. Does he know her home, her county, her family, her support? No! I have questioned Britton, not to mention warning him–"

"You have!" exclaimed the curate, "and what did he say?"

"Told me to go to that infernal region I mentioned. He can't listen to sound reason. They never can!"

"Ah, well," sighed Trascott, "I intended dropping a hint, but since you've anticipated me without result–"

"Might as well talk to a log!" Ainsworth cut in. "I shall be glad when the thing has run its course and we get out of here. This Algerian scenery palls on me! If something would only happen to hasten the climax, it might cheer my heart. I believe I shall hire some dogs of Arabs to abduct the fair princess and let Britton play the rescuer somewhere out on the Djujuras."

"It may not be necessary," said Trascott. "He's going to that dance to-night."

"Yes," muttered the lawyer, "he's been dressing and fussing ever since supper. There's the launch now!"

The gasoline craft spluttered and danced over the waves to the pier where Ainsworth and the curate were smoking.

"You lazy duffers," Britton cried, "aren't you going up?"

He stepped out of the launch, a tall, handsome figure in his evening clothes and top-hat. His paletot hung on his left arm, which was now entirely well, and as he faced his friends they both thought how singularly powerful he looked. Broad of shoulder and deep of chest, it seemed as if the frames of the other two men together would have been required to equal his bulk. His straight, finely-cut features and blue eyes held an expression unmistakably aristocratic.

"Aren't you going up?" he repeated.

"We'll look into the reading-room later on," replied Ainsworth. "I don't care to dance, and it disagrees with Trascott's digestion."

"See you there, then," was his farewell. "Don't forget you can get all you

want to eat in the dining-room for the sum of six francs."

A *fiacre* pulled up near the wharf at his hail.

"Hotel de ––," he said, jumping in with an object-lesson of alacrity.

The driver accepted the hint and dashed away at a swift pace through the lower town till the long ascent which led up to Mustapha Supérieure compelled him to walk his animal.

The last two weeks had passed for Rex Britton as a single day. Not a minute of the whole time dragged, for the reason that he had spent every available minute with Maud Morris. He considered the sojourn, which he had lengthened day by day, as Paradise–the direct antithesis, in fact, of Ainsworth's view! He had pursued the wild dream of that first night on the harbor with all his passionate persistence till it suddenly ensnared him in its tangible and compelling reality.

The lawyer back on the pier was wishing for something to hasten the climax. In spite of his faculty of shrewd observation, Ainsworth did not dream of how deeply Britton was already involved with the woman whom he, Ainsworth, mistrusted.

It would take a wise man indeed to time and trace the development of a romance when the setting lies between the pagan Djujuras and the legend-steeped Mediterranean. Britton would have been filled with dismay had he stopped to inspect, analyze and adjudge his actions during those two weeks. His impulses were at riot under the sway of a heavenly elixir which the woman held to his lips; he never looked back; his mind was centred on the days ahead, planning a wonderful permanency for the exotic, filmy atmosphere of present experiences.

As the *fiacre* climbed the Mustapha Supérieure Britton could possess in vision the whole expanse of the port, the wharves dimly lighted and busy with the night-labor that the volume of trade enforced, the illuminated vessels in the wide anchorage and the mingling gleams that marked the Mustapha Inférieure.

Britton knew every nook of the climbing city, old, by almost a thousand years, in story and conflict. With the lady of pale-gold beauty he had explored all the charming retreats of both towns. They had loitered in the Place Royale amid the orange and lime trees, finding pleasure in watching the cosmopolitan crowds which thronged that oblong space in the centre of the city. The traits of character disclosed by representatives of so many different nations–Moors, Jews and Arabs, Germans, Spaniards, French, Corsicans, Italians and Maltese, and scores of other races–proved very interesting to the English observers.

The mild, balmy Algerian evenings seemed temptations to roam abroad, and the two had grown accustomed to promenade the Bab-el-Ouad and the Bab-azoun, which ran north and south in a parallel direction for half a mile. Those walks down the dim vista of flanking colonnades beneath an ivory moon, the same that lighted the Sahara caravans through the desert tracts, intoxicated senses and blood alike.

They had delved into the *djamas*, or superior mosques, the *mesjids*, or inferior ones, and the *marabouts*, which were the tombs or sanctuaries of the ancient Moorish saints; they had plunged into the market rabbles on the Squares de Chartres, d'Isly and Mahon, lolled in the Parisian-like boulevards and arcades of the new town, sat upon the flat-roofed, prison-windowed houses at sunset to catch the tang of the sweeping sea-wind on their faces, journeyed in the yacht as far as the lighthouse on Cape Matifou and the forbidding brow of Cape Caxine, or stretched their land-legs in the ascent of the narrow, jagged street called the Casbah that led up to the old Moorish fortress of the same name perched high on the steep, and commanding all Algiers.

Standing on the height of the Mustapha Supérieure where the *fiacre* had left him in front of the hotel piazza, Britton felt as if under some binding spell which the land of the sheik had cast upon him, a spell from which he would not willingly escape, for the delicious, cobwebby fetters only thrilled instead of chafing.

Dismissing his driver with a liberal fee, Britton ran lightly up the steps of the magnificent hostelry, resplendent with blazing lights and ornate structural patterns designed to rival the architectural beauties of the other fashionable resorts that contested for the patronage of the most select people who came to stay at Algiers.

The obsequious concierge, stationed in the hall to look after new-comers, directed a servant to appropriate Britton's coat and hat and bowed the Englishman toward the reception-room with a flood of welcoming French.

The reception-room–which some took the liberty of calling the morning-room–was a cosy, oak-panelled, damask-hung chamber where hotel inmates and visitors could meet or wait for friends. It gave one the impression of being very well appointed with rugs, round tables, leather-covered chairs, cushioned divans, pictures, mantels and window-seats.

At Britton's entrance the solitary occupant of the reception-room rose from a divan. She came forward with a glad, excited light beautifying her face, the filmy, silver-colored gown she wore sweeping gracefully about her slim, exquisite figure.

Quite close to Britton she paused and took hold of the lapels of his coat, smoothing them with her soft white fingers.

Had the lawyer been there to see, this action would have settled once for all the question of Britton's relation to Maud Morris. In her movement was the suggestion of intimate possession never to be mistaken for anything else. It told more than could be expressed in whole chapters of explanation.

"The dance has begun," she murmured, looking up, her eyes soft and shining beneath the burnished gold of her hair, "and everybody has gone either to take part or to watch. You are somewhat late, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am late," Britton said softly–"later than I thought, but I am glad, for my tardiness lets me meet you like this!" He nodded around the empty room.

She smiled into Britton's dancing eyes. He laid his hands gently upon hers, and the touch brought the delicate rose to her cheek, but the concierge's rapid French jabber warned them. Someone was approaching the reception-room. She slipped a hand in Britton's arm and turned to the door.

"Let us go to the concert-room," she said simply.

Britton bowed courteously as an attaché from the British Consulate entered with a party of ladies, and they went out amid the customary admiring stares.

They passed the rooms whence came the rattle of ping-pong, the whirr of billiards or the almost noiseless shuffle of bridge, and finally came to the ball-room. A ravishing Hungarian waltz swelled up from the palm screens which hid the orchestra; a hundred couples tripped the glassy floor-space, the conventional black-and-white attire of the gentlemen lending an effective contrast to the wonderful, daring toilettes of the ladies.

Everybody portrayed supreme happiness as well as a nice consciousness of what was correct, and everybody seemed to be trying to outdo everyone else in the ardor of enjoyment.

Not least by any means among the joy-seekers was Rex Britton.

His arm encircled his companion's waist and they stepped out, the handsomest couple in the room, swaying a second to the time of the orchestra. Then they glided away, captivated by the pulsating strains of the waltz, and lost themselves in the maze.

CHAPTER III.

Ainsworth shook his billiard-cue with unmistakable emphasis in the stranger's face.

"Get out," he cried irascibly. "You're drunk, and I don't want to talk to you!" He pushed his annoyer rudely away, but the latter returned to the attack, whereupon Bertrand Trascott intervened.

"Have patience, Cyril," he begged. "The man evidently has a reason for his persistence. Now, sir, what is it? We would like to go on with our game."

The stranger who had circled in to the corner-table in the billiard-room of the great hotel and stopped their play presented an uninviting and ludicrous ap-

pearance.

His head and shoulders reminded Trascott of those of a dissipated Austrian virtuoso whom he knew well and whose brilliance had become very spasmodic on account of relapses to the same vice which apparently ruled the stranger. The resemblance was quite close, embodying the uncontrolled, tremulous chin and lips surmounted by a fiercely-curled wisp of moustache, the hawked nose, narrowed eyes and prominent, bony cheeks, with a pair of puttied ears sprouting from his hair like old mushrooms in the grass, while a pinched, sunken neck failed to fill his peaked shoulders.

Trascott thought that if both the Austrian virtuoso and the portly butler who had come to be looked on as an institution at Britton Hall were cut in two, and the upper half of the virtuoso pieced to the lower, corpulent section of the Honorable Oliver's servant the result would be the prototype of the stranger who had undertaken to tack among the billiard-tables.

"What do you want?" he asked the man, with more severity.

The questioned one surveyed Trascott for a space, recognized his curate's cloth and decided he had no business with him, for his eyes flashed aggressively upon the lawyer, who was again preparing for the execution of the stroke that the man had spoiled.

Ainsworth's back was turned, so the intruder jogged his right elbow for attention with the result that the lawyer's ball, deflected at right angles, leaped across the next table and spread confusion among a group of Frenchmen playing there.

This second interruption of the stringing of a long break and the titter of idle observers, combined with the French stares of contempt, was not at all conducive to the regaining of Ainsworth's equanimity.

"By gad, sir, get out of here," he admonished, "or I'll very soon have the concierge throw you out!"

"You?" asked the stranger, with a belligerent glare.

"Exactly!" Ainsworth answered emphatically. He looked as if he would quite gladly exempt the concierge from consideration and perform the operation himself.

Trascott had been roaming the room in search of an hotel servant who could lead this obstinate fellow away; there being none about, however, he compromised on a marker and returned to the intruder.

He still concentrated his attention on the lawyer with that same belligerent glare, though in his eyes a rising flicker of apprehension betrayed the inward reflection that he had somehow caught a Tartar in this smooth-faced, perfectly-fed man with coat off and billiard-cue in hand.

"You're Britton?" he inquired in a thick, heavy voice.

"I'm nothing of the sort," the irate lawyer returned.

The stranger took a step nearer and leaned his hip against the billiard-table.

"You deny it?" he snarled vindictively. "The assistant concierge informed me that you were Britton."

Ainsworth flourished the cue in his hand suggestively.

"Then the assistant concierge is an ass, like yourself," he said. "There are two of you, and this hotel is no place for such a team."

Trascott pushed forward the marker he had procured.

"Come, monsieur," said the marker. "I think there are better places than this for you."

The stranger whirled and savagely struck away the persuading fingers with which the polite Frenchman had grasped his arm.

"Look out for yourself," he stormed, "or I'll have the manager pack you off to-morrow, my fine fellow. Let me tell you that you can't turn men of my standing into the street. I have engaged rooms and paid for them in advance, and I'll go where I d–d please in this hotel–and do what I please also!"

"No, you won't, my friend," warned Ainsworth, tapping him on the shoulder with quiet determination. "You won't come in here twice to insult me and interrupt my play. Just keep that in your muddled mind!"

"I was informed that you were a certain Britton I was searching for," said the other bluntly, in the spirit of rude apology.

"Do I look like Britton?" cried the lawyer, testily. "I stand five feet six, while Britton stands six feet one. I weigh one hundred and fifty pounds; Britton weighs two hundred and ten. Britton dances in the ballroom with the ladies and brings them ices, but I play billiards with a curate. I ask you again, do I resemble him? No, you say. And I'll tell you something else, too! Britton wouldn't have suffered your impudence for this length of time. He's a quick-blooded beggar, and he'd have jolly well twisted your neck by now."

"Will you come out, sir?" begged the marker, making a second attempt, at the importunations of Trascott.

The stranger eyed him and raised a hand as if to strike, then diverted the hand to his waistcoat pocket and threw his card on the table.

"Take that card to the manager as my complaint, and tell him to dismiss you," he said, somewhat haughtily. "I'm Christopher Morris, promoter of the Yukon Dredging Company."

The servant took the pasteboard, a little awed. Ainsworth had not caught the stranger's surname, but he snapped at the mention of his especial enterprise.

"The Yukon Dredging Company!" he exclaimed suspiciously. "If you are the promoter of that scheme, I warn you to watch out for me. I'm Ainsworth, the law-machine, and I'm convinced that the Dredging Company is a mere swindle.

Be careful! I'll put the Crown after you at the very first opportunity."

The object of his censure sniffed in scorn, but Ainsworth continued:

"You invited my antagonism. Now perhaps you'll regret it. If anything angers me, it is the loss of my self-respect, and those Frenchmen took me for an idiot. But you sound decidedly out of place next the Sahara, my friend. You should be at the Arctic end of a different continent. What are you hunting in Algiers–floating capital?"

"No," was the answer. "I am hunting my wife. I arrived but an hour ago from Tangier, where the cursed doctors quarantined me for a chill which they insisted on calling fever. When after twenty days' hammering at their thick heads I convinced them of their mistake, they let me out, and I found my wife had hurried away to escape infection." He laughed, and with a cold, indignant significance intensifying his words, repeated: "Hurried away to escape infection!"

"Your wife," echoed the puzzled lawyer. "What has that to do with your offensive attitude? What has that to do with Rex Britton?"

"They tell me that in finding Britton I shall find my wife!"

Understanding rushed upon Ainsworth, and he, as well as Trascott, was stirred to fiery excitement. He shook the man roughly by the shoulder. "Your name?" he breathlessly demanded. "What did you say was your name?"

"Morris–Christopher Morris," was the answer. "My wife's name is Maud, and the devil gave her the prettiest face in England."

Ainsworth passed his hand across his forehead. His face held the first expression of dismay that the curate had ever seen there. To Trascott it was evident that the lawyer's unconcealed mistrust of the woman concerned had not extended to such an unforeseen contingency as now existed upon the statement of Morris.

The barrister was not looking at the curate and could not see the accompanying signs of extreme agitation in the latter's countenance. The former seemed to be weighing a doubtful point in his mind, and when he spoke it was as to himself in a musing, philosophical manner.

"This is either a drunken hallucination, insanity, or the truth," he said, softly. "Let us have a test!" He dropped a vesta match upon the green baize of the table.

"Pick that up," he said to Morris.

The man stared an instant and obeyed. Ainsworth watched him closely. His fingers went down with disconcerting steadiness, closed unerringly over the match and returned it to the barrister. The latter raised appealing eyes to his friend and said:

"He drinks, but he is not overly drunk now. I'm afraid it is the truth."

Trascott, his earnest face all troubled and his lips compressed in a grim line, shook his head.

"This is something like what I feared," he groaned.

CHAPTER IV.

Morris mumbled something of repeated apology and made a movement to leave the room.

Ainsworth stopped him.

"I'll find Britton," he said. "This mess has to be straightened out, and it wouldn't do for you to wander round till you meet him and raise Cain before a lot of women. I'll bring him here in a minute."

"You're kind," grunted the other, sarcastically, "but I'll wait for you."

The lawyer hastened out, peering into the different rooms in search of the man he wanted. He suspected that he would find the woman with Britton, and as he sought, unheeding acquaintances or greetings, he came upon the couple in the dining-room.

They were standing at the buffet, chatting and laughing and partaking of the six-franc supper which Britton had mentioned to his friends. The dining-hall was full, and Ainsworth hesitated at the door. He had a peculiar and intense hatred of scenes, and he knew that this company, consisting partly of bored aristocracy and partly of different gradings of the vulgar rich, was ready to stare and laugh at an unconventional act, as, for instance, the interruption of someone's luncheon.

Britton espied him at the door, and cut short his vacillation by beckoning him over, making room for him at the same time. Ainsworth approached them grimly.

"Have you not had lunch?" Britton inquired cheerily. "Come, there's room here. We'll wait for you."

"I couldn't eat a bite," said the lawyer, truthfully. "I wanted to speak to you for a moment, if you're through. That's all."

He avoided the eyes of Maud Morris and did not attempt to address her directly.

"There's the after-lunch dance, you know," objected Britton. "It's a matter of etiquette with these people."

"Can't you let it go?" asked the lawyer, sharply.

His tone awakened his friend's scrutiny. "What's the matter?" he asked. "How long do you want me?"

"It may be some time," answered Ainsworth. "I wish you would come immediately."

Maud Morris smiled full upon the lawyer and forced him to meet her glorious eyes.

"Just one round," she pleaded prettily, with a nod towards the ballroom.

At that moment Ainsworth was transformed, in his own mind, into the grim master of life. The other two were the trifling, wayward children to whom chastisement would presently come. It did not matter if, in their ignorance, they coveted those few turns together; they could have their gambols just on the eve of disillusionment! It might help the cure of Britton's malady when Ainsworth would afterwards remind him of the incident.

"By all means," he said sarcastically. "It will satisfy these sticklers."

They swept merrily into the adjacent ballroom, and Ainsworth followed as far as the entrance. The occasion struck him with a certain grim humor, and he chuckled silently as he stood in the alcove watching the couple circling to the orchestra's music.

They floated slowly, as in a delightful dream, round the immense and gorgeously-decorated salon, the woman looking upward ecstatically, with her face aquiver with light, and whispering with both lips and eyes. Britton, oblivious to the irony of the situation, had forgotten even Ainsworth. He was plunged in the joy of the moment, and the watching lawyer could imagine what words he was murmuring in the meshes of her hair.

Then, in the midst of his ironical judgment, a pang of something nearly akin to pity moved Ainsworth. For an instant he debated with himself the issue if this amour should prove genuine on both sides, but the thought was immediately dismissed by his cynical reasoning as improbable. The man was in earnest, but the woman was a siren, in Ainsworth's critical view.

One round of the ballroom floor was all the enjoyment they allowed themselves, for the lawyer significantly stepped out when they reached the entrance curtains. Britton looked at him vaguely and contracted his brows in a half-frown when he remembered.

He led the lady to a settee and bent over her for a moment.

"You will come back soon?" she whispered with a shade of wistfulness.

Britton pressed her fingers on her fan under pretence of examining it.

"Yes," he promised, glorying in the depths of her eyes, "I'll come back, not soon, but at once. Our dance isn't finished, you know."

He strode across the room, tall and elegant, and smiling over his shoulder so that the woman's heart leaped oddly as she watched him.

"Now, Ainsworth," he said, laying a hand on his comrade's arm, "what do you want with me? You'll please hurry, won't you?"

The lawyer drew Britton's arm tightly through his own and turned across the main promenade.

"That woman's married," he said with brutal directness, "and I'm taking you to her husband."

Britton whipped out his arm from Ainsworth's grasp and held it upraised, as

if to deliver a blow, while a red wave of denunciation flamed over his fine features.

"You–" he began, and halted, for the grim, set look in his companion's eyes carried undeniable conviction.

"Strike me if you like," Ainsworth observed harshly, "but come this way with me."

Britton's fist fell to his side, and he drew his whole frame rigidly erect in a sort of convulsive movement. In spite of his great strength he staggered a little, and his face was ashy-white.

He turned irresolutely back towards the entrance of the dancing salon, but Ainsworth took his arm again.

"No, this way," he urged, and led him as he would a boy.

People marked his rigid muscles and pallid skin, and murmured compassionately at the apparent stroke of illness.

"Hello, old chap!" cried one of his numerous acquaintances, shouldering up, "what's wrong? Heat too much for you? By Jove, you're in a beastly funk, and I don't wonder, for it's deuced close in here."

The lawyer waved him aside, and they went on, while all the guests began to complain of heat, and the assiduous concierge ran to open wider the French casements on the lawns.

Once or twice Ainsworth looked up at his companion. Britton's pallor and tremendous calm, so suggestive of the latent volcanic powers, alarmed the lawyer.

"How do you feel?" he whispered sympathetically.

"I feel nothing–absolutely nothing," responded Britton, in a dull, passionless tone, and Ainsworth did not doubt him for a moment.

"Where is your man?" he asked after a second, in the same listless and unimpassioned voice.

"Here, in this room," Ainsworth answered, entering the billiard parlors. They skirted the tables and came where Morris stood with Trascott.

"Here is the man Morris," he announced in a measured manner. "Morris, this is Britton."

As Ainsworth spoke, he braced himself to guard against a hundred ugly possibilities which this meeting presented. He scanned the lineaments of the two men, alert to catch the nerve purpose dependent upon each one's expression, and in thus studying the features of Morris he lost sight of the latter's hands, which were thrust loosely in the pockets of his coat.

The husband's narrow eyes glittered; his lips were drawn back over his teeth in a wolfish snarl; all his capability for extreme hate seemed to be given free scope as he centred ferocious glances on the stony countenance of Rex Britton.

The other occupants of the room instinctively felt that the atmosphere held some vital and dramatic portent. They stopped their play and gazed wonderingly

on the group over by the corner table.

There the two principal figures glared at each other without uttering a word, the one standing upright with set face and folded arms, the other crouching like a beast ready to spring in rage.

Ainsworth had never felt such a tense moment, even in his pleadings before tightly-packed courts of law. He was involuntarily forced to hold his breath in suspense, and a band of steel seemed to rim his chest. Trascott, with his habitual, comforting sanity, offered no speech. He recognized arbitration to be as futile as it was inconceivable. Things must run their course. Only he was ready, like Ainsworth, to guard against deadly violence following the outbreak.

For some moments Morris crouched and glared, a malicious quiver running through him. Then if any of the men had watched where his right hand was hidden they might have seen the cloth of the pocket poked forward by something cylindrical inside.

A stunning report, coming apparently from nowhere, shook the windows. Britton reeled, as a tuft of hair floated off from above his temple, and jumped like the recoil of a spring upon his would-be murderer. He dealt two sharp, quick blows before the weapon could be pulled again, and the thing was all over.

Morris lay in a quiet heap, with threads of white smoke drifting up from the powder-blackened hole in his pocket.

Britton rubbed the red welt along his scalp and nodded gravely to Ainsworth.

"You're my counsel in this matter, of course," he said. "Attend to whatever explanations are needed! Trascott, will you come with me?"

They elbowed out through the motley, clamorous, ever-increasing crowd that the pistol-shot had gathered.

"What do you mean to do?" asked the curate, anxiously.

"The hardest thing I ever did," Britton answered pitifully. "I want you, because I doubt if I can do it alone. I'm afraid of myself, Trascott!"

CHAPTER V.

They sought the concierge and met him, all flustered, coming out of the office by the side entrance on his way to the room of tumult which they had just quitted. Britton added to his cares by despatching him with a message to Maud Morris in

the ballroom.

"Tell Mrs. Morris that I am waiting in her drawing-room," he said. "Ask her if she will take the elevator at once and see me on an important matter."

The concierge made expressive gestures with his hands.

"Not Madame Morris," he suggested, somewhat puzzled. "Monsieur means Mademoiselle!"

"Ah! yes, of course," returned the Englishman, quickly, "A mere slip of the tongue! My message is for Mademoiselle, for Miss Morris. You will find her on that large settee just at the entrance of the salon."

He smiled grimly at the precise classification which to-morrow would be of a different value. The ghost of the smile lingered on his lips, as, disdaining the lift, he pulled Trascott towards the stairs.

"Let us walk up," he begged. "It will give me time to think."

Trascott moved beside him automatically and left Britton to his own reflections. That, he thought, was undoubtedly the surest way to victory.

Their ascent was slow and silent, their footfalls deadening to an odd, mysterious void on the thickly-padded steps. The mounting sensation, the absence of noise from his movements, seemed to lift Britton away from himself. His personality was effaced, in the physical sense, and the basic impulses which influenced his course of existence lay bared before an inner tribunal.

The vaster issue remained with him; the moral measure applied to his strength alone; the portentous effects of the next few minutes would be essentially moulded at the dictum of his emotional tendencies. The present exigency could be neither flouted nor shunned. This difficulty of another's evolving, augmented in no small measure by his own unseeing folly, demanded immediate and decisive solution. Apology was cowardice and parley an affront to Britton's frank fibre, and both of them smacked of guilt.

The suite of rooms taken by Maud Morris was situated on the first floor just to the right of the public hall, near the landing. She had at her disposal a luxurious drawing-room, a more luxurious boudoir, and bath and sleeping apartments.

Trascott stopped at the stair-head and folded his arms, signifying his exclusion from the approaching developments.

"I don't think you will have any need of me," he ventured reassuringly.

Britton vouchsafed no reply. The swift momentary reaction he experienced did not disturb the hard, emotionless mask of his features, and the sudden, peculiarly human revolt stirred by his unsatisfied heart-hunger was crushed with a tremendous summoning of will-power.

He swiftly traversed the corridor and entered the drawing-room.

It was empty, and a poignant chagrin struck Britton, inflicting pain scarcely definable from that of humiliation and disgrace, as he realized that perhaps Maud

Morris, detecting impending exposure, had suddenly clutched seclusion as a safeguard with that wanton spirit and careless indifference of the time-hardened trifler.

But Britton was wrong in this thought!

While he paced a few steps in indecision, the boudoir curtains parted, and through the soft, shaded illumination of the room Maud Morris looked out at him.

"I am waiting for you," she called, with a tremulous smile which indicated the fluttering state of her feelings, yet left the origin of that uncertainty in doubt.

If it was a bait, Britton snapped like a deluded fish. The sudden presentation of the less disagreeable side of the situation weakened his guard. He acted before he reflected, and stepped forward into the boudoir.

The tapestry fell in place behind him, and with its silken swish Britton felt the error he had unthinkingly committed. This boudoir, which enthralled with its essentially feminine appointments, was the worst place in the world for rallying stern resolutions and formulating all-embracing decisions such as Britton proposed to make. The place could only shake his sincere purpose. The drawing-room, in graver setting, would have been far safer for him!

He put a rigid curb upon his impulses, and attempted to shut out the powerful charm of low-burning rose lights, Bohemian color, and lavish decoration, but a stronger influence than these laid its hold upon him, that delicate, indefinable, alluring fragrance which is found only within woman's precincts, and which attracts mightily, like woman's love, because of its tender, subtle elusiveness.

Then, more compelling than the sense-conquering color-effect, more entrancing than the pervading perfume, was the magic of Maud Morris herself. To Britton's mind, in moments wholly calm and lucid, he thought he had never seen perfections of face and form which approached hers. Such beauty as she possessed was technically matchless, but, in general, there are intervals when fascination flags and any existing flaws in the object of admiration force attention.

When Britton was cursed with these critical flashes, as he was accustomed to inwardly express it, he could detect a lack of something–it might have been soul–behind the level splendor of her blue eyes, but if he tried to fathom these depths and define this missing attribute, the mere outward splendor, like the crystal sheen of deep, clear water, was dazzling enough to make him dizzy and engulf him, and the effort at introspection went unrewarded.

So Britton stood wrestling with the spell of environment, hurling mental refusals upon the suggestive enticement of the boudoir atmosphere and battling against the magical allurement of the woman who was the climax in the dainty sphere of exotic loveliness.

She seemed framed in the shell of the room as if it had been especially designed to harmonize with her charms. Her pale, silver-colored gown swept about

her feet, leaving her figure in a contour of marvellous grace; the arms and bosom, full and rounded, came out from it, white as ivory; her face, beautiful as a rare orchid, with the crowning glory of her hair above, was one to weaken a strong man.

Harassed by a flood of doubts and regrets, Britton gazed at her with wide, darkened eyes, the shame of his position vying in torture with the pang of his loss. He had come to judge, to condemn and to scorn, but his capacity for this was submerged in painful realization of the black void of the future through which he must walk.

Maud Morris recognized the facing of a crisis in his attitude, and she nervously clasped her slim fingers as she read something of what was passing in his mind.

"Rex, you know!" she cried, with a sort of of awed inspiration tinged by an inflection of fear.

"Yes, I know," he answered despairingly. "I know everything! God help me–and you!"

There was no reproach in his words, rather a prayer. The thing before him was too beautiful to curse. He had plainly misjudged his strength and underrated his task. The animated presence of her he loved filled both his physical and mental vision with impressionistic power. The passion which he thought had died at the instant of Ainsworth's announcement grew in magnitude as a spring torrent grows with a rush of sorrowful rain. It mastered him, crushed his scorn and turned condemnation upon his own head. To the great credit of Britton's manlier qualities a phase of unconscious heroism ruled as the foremost factor in his new solution of the problem.

"Good-bye," he said with a near approach to kindness, "and forgive me if you can. I think I am the one to blame."

He held out his hand before turning to leave the boudoir. Maud Morris snatched it rather than took it, apprehension in her eyes.

"Good-bye, Rex?" she whispered. "You can't go from me. Think of how we've cared. Think of the invisible ties."

Britton's mouth hardened, showing his disgust. Her speech came nearer rousing him to voluble contempt than any inherent feeling.

"Ties!" he exclaimed severely. "Ignominy upon a marriage bond is no tie. It is rather a matter of expiation!"

His words had the intonation of farewell, and he laid one hand on the portières, but Maud Morris rushed forward with a cry, holding him with a passionate caress which was either the height of consummate acting or the essence of mad desire.

Her touch thrilled Britton for one vivid, insane moment, and he stood like

a man in a dream listening to her vociferous pleading.

"Take me with you!" she cried. "Biskra is two days by rail, Sidi Okba two hours more by carriage–then the desert! The Sahara, Rex, do you hear? No one shall ever find us!"

Britton's brain swung slowly back through bewilderment at the mention of detail, and he stared at her with a gradual horror growing in his eyes as his idol ground itself to dust.

"The desert, dear,–and oblivion," she murmured again.

A hundred scenes flashed before his sight. One stood out–the picture of Trascott waiting for him, his fine face plunged in anxiety and a strong prayer in his generous heart. This psychic vision completed Britton's revulsion, and he violently pushed the woman away.

"The desert–and hell for us both!" he fiercely cried. "Let me get out of this!"

In that moment of repulse Maud Morris assumed her true character, and Britton read behind her eyes for the first time. She did not lack a soul; the soul leaped out at him, but it was as the advance of a serpent, malignant and revengeful. Her beauty lost itself in a hard, bright mask of undistinctive flesh and eyes.

"If you go, I'll ruin you!" she warned, in a voice hoarse with jealous fury. "I'll spoil you for the dear eligibles from one end of England to the other!"

Britton gazed at her transformation before answering, and wondered why he had loved her.

"Your husband will do that," he said at last. "I hardly expect to keep out of court."

"Reflect!" she said harshly. "He cannot do it as I can."

The knots of the portière cords would not yield to Britton's pull, and he tore the silken curtains down in a heap upon the floor. Their clinging folds seemed symbolic of their siren-like owner, and the man shuddered as he dropped them from his fingers.

"You will not reflect?"

"The enormity of your proposal precludes reflection," said Britton, witheringly.

"It's war then?" Her tone was steely.

"It's war, if you put it that way," he wearily responded; "but hadn't you better spare your own name?"

She laughed shortly.

"Mine will not count," she said mockingly. "The public will sympathize with the deluded wife. While holding me blameless, English society will haul your reputation over the cobblestones till there isn't a shred of it left."

Britton regarded her silently for a long, comprehensive minute, and went swiftly out of the boudoir. She followed, still reluctant to give up the battle.

"There is another consideration–the attitude of the Honorable Oliver Britton in this disgrace," she said, using the last and most cruel weapon of all. "Do you know what your uncle will do? If you don't, I can tell you!"

Britton paled perceptibly, as he met the battery of her eyes, upon the drawing-room threshold. He made a denunciatory wave of his hand and closed the door sharply.

Trascott had no words. He gave Britton a fervent finger-clasp and a bright smile of relief and thankfulness. No elation he had ever felt at the rescuing of some poor wretch from the English slums compared with his joy at Britton's personal victory.

They used the elevator. At the bottom of the lift, Ainsworth waited beside a servant who held their coats and hats.

"Well, what is it?" questioned Britton, earnestly.

"He says it's law, as soon as they reach home," replied Ainsworth, grimly. "Have you any thought of cruising in other parts?"

Retreat was repugnant to a strong man like Britton. He shook his head decidedly.

In fifteen minutes they had reached the wharf and boarded the *Mottisfont*. She rode at a single anchor chain, and twin coils of grayish smoke issued from her double funnels.

It was the second watch, and the mate held the bridge. Britton called to him.

"Have you a head of steam?"

"Plenty, sir," the mate replied.

"Then weigh your anchor!"

"Aye, aye, sir. Where away?"

"Home to New Shoreham!"

CHAPTER VI.

The case of Morris *versus* Britton, as developed in the judicial courts, was one of those neurotic society flurries that never fail to arouse interest and promote discussion from highland to sea-down.

Complete details of all legal proceedings, together with copious comment on the demeanor of complainant and defendant, as well as irrelevant addenda concerning such things as dress and facial expression, can be found in the back files of

a certain aristocratic journal, but nothing edifying is to be gained by perusal of this voluminous report. The circulation of the sheet in question was given sudden and tremendous impetus, yet this proved merely temporary, for the revengeful note obtruded, the personal animosity broke forth, overstepping all limits of honor and fair play, so that those who had not heretofore followed public topics over-closely wondered what was the editor's quarrel with the defendant. But his quarrel was not with the nephew; although through the nephew he hoped to reach the uncle, the Honorable Oliver Britton, who was abroad, representing England in a consular capacity.

The name of Britton, of Britton Hall, was high enough and proud enough and old enough to afford a splendid target for the batteries of ignominy which were masked within the publishing offices of the warring journal, and the fact that the Honorable Oliver Britton had once humbled by personal opposition the political aspirations of the editor was what made the reputation-shelling process so destructive. Still, in spite of the deliberate use of his heaviest artillery, the man behind the fire of words did not foresee the startling result of such drastic measures.

When, after months of fighting through successive law-courts, the celebrated action came to an end, the journal's editor had to announce, much to his chagrin, that the final verdict was dismissal with a division of costs. This decision, the report intimated, was due entirely to that matchless legal machine, Ainsworth.

However, the enemy of the Britton name enjoyed the satisfaction of knowing that his vitriolic pen had done more than he dared to hope, for he soon had the supreme delight of stating that, owing to the disgrace involving the family name, the Honorable Oliver Britton had resigned his post as Consul at a foreign court. Furthermore, the powers that appoint had placed another in the post in the diplomatic service which, it was understood, was being reserved for Rex Britton till his return from the holiday cruise that his honor-graduation at Oxford had earned.

And, later, the journal announced what it had not foreseen, the news that the Honorable Oliver Britton had returned from the Continent, violently quarrelled with his nephew and disinherited him. It gloated over the cruel truth that of all the Brittons, who had for generations counted thousands of pounds upon their rent-rolls, a Britton now stood penniless, except for a paltry three hundred guineas left out of his patrimony, nearly exhausted by the long legal battle; gloated over him because the gentleman's hand must turn to labor, the ambitious trusts of educational and diplomatic posts being denied him on account of the name-smudge.

There the journal's report and comment ends, except for an item telling that Christopher Morris and his wife had gone to America.

The night Rex Britton quarrelled with his uncle, he went out from Britton Hall, down white gravel walks between clipped hedges, under the massed oaks in the familiar grove, and along green Sussex lanes to the depot. There he telegraphed Ainsworth to get Trascott to meet him at the former's rooms, as new developments had arisen which occasioned his departure from what he had considered home since his boyhood days. The night express took him up and whirled him away to London.

Trascott was with a dying woman in the slums, so it was evening of the next day before the three friends could get together in Cyril Ainsworth's rooms. The curate came in, weary and depressed, and with a gravity of bearing caused by association with the near presence of death.

"The uncle has cut the nephew out of the will and kicked him off the estate," Ainsworth plunged, giving Trascott a terse summing-up of Rex Britton's explanations. "He has left three hundred pounds of money, three mountains of pride, and the strength of three bulls. He's off to Canada and the Yukon!"

Trascott stilled his surprise and bent earnestly over the table.

"I'd stay," he advised pointedly. "You can live down the disinheritment and open the barricaded doors of position. I'd stay in England and live it down."

Britton was sullen and decided. "No," he returned, "I'm out of England till I can buy back everything I've lost. Understand? I'm disappearing from the dearly beloved public which takes such an interest in my misfortune and in my future. Isn't that what victims of circumstance try? I'll be welcomed as the prodigal nephew when I return–if I ever do!"

"Don't be cynical," Trascott warned. "It's dangerous in your case."

"What would you have me do?" Rex exclaimed warmly. "Shall I turn gamekeeper or valet? And don't think I'm priggish! I dare be menial, but, by Jove, I won't be a slave! Independency is my obsession. That's why I'm for this new gold-trail."

And the gold-trail held its persistent lure in spite of any arguments.

Two weeks later he sighted Newfoundland from the decks of an Allan Liner, passed through the waters of Belle Isle, chafing on Labrador's iron coast, caught up Heath Point on bleak Anticosti, and won the river-stretch of four hundred and thirty-eight miles to Quebec. Twelve hours more and the liner anchored in the port of Montreal.

Rex Britton had hunted for three seasons in the Laurentians, and at Montreal he hastened to find two comrades of the chase who had always been members of his party. One was the voyageur, Pierre Giraud, and the other a plainsman, Jim Laurance, who had drifted up from some place in the Southern States. Britton inquired for them in their old haunts.

"Pierre?" cried a French riverman, at his question; "Pierre an' Jim Laurance?

Dey bot' gon' on de Yukon. Beeg strik' dere–ver' beeg strik'."

Further enquiry elicited the information that Jim Laurance was keeping a road-house at Indian River, on the Dawson Trail, while Pierre Giraud was some place in the land of gold without his whereabouts being definitely known.

On hearing this news Britton dallied no further, but crossed the continent alone, caught a Puget Sound boat and steamed north. All the way up people talked insane things of a new strike east of Juneau, and, like a fool, he listened. Like a fool, also, he rushed in hot haste with the van of the stampede which followed the boat's touching at Juneau. The lure of gold faded somewhat for him when they reached the much-touted valley and found that not a hundredth part of what had been reported was true.

Though hope was lessened in immense proportion, still Britton staked with his fellows, only to have his ardor dampened still more. The bedrock of his claim was as clean of yellow grains as a well-swept floor, and while his neighbors struck pay-gravel of moderate richness, a curse of bad luck blanked his own efforts.

Twice more he did the same thing, once on Admiralty Island and again at Glacier Bay below Mount Crillon. Each time he reported his ill-success to Jim Laurance by letters which he sent with in-going steamers to Dyea, whence they were borne onward over Chilcoot by the Dawson mail-carriers. And Laurance, deprived of the satisfaction of replying on account of Britton's itinerancy, sat in his road-house at Indian River and waited for the Englishman to come to him. He held as a truism his own saying that the Dawson Trail knew every leg in the Yukon at some time or other, and he did not doubt for an instant that Britton's legs would presently appear, straining through the weary miles like the countless pairs of limbs he had seen stamping over the route which led to the Mecca of the gold-lands.

Having wasted the summer months and a great part of his money in three futile stampedes, Britton found himself upon the Dyea beach at the approach of winter, with another *ignis fatuus* luring him on the inward trail. A tremendous rush was on to Forty Forks, east of Lake Marsh, where, it was said, a prospector had kicked over glistening nuggets with the soles of his hobnailed cruisers. The wildest reports of wealth were circulating, as usual, and men went forward in mad haste to locate on the creek before the white breath of winter should blot out the face of the land.

Britton, grown wary through bitter experience, cut the reports down to a sounder basis of common sense, sifted out apparent exaggerations and discrepancies, and decided that Forty Forks was at least worth trying for, although, when he remembered three successive defeats, he misdoubted the issue.

Dyea was in a ferment. Boat-loads of passengers and baggage crowded the beach and camp, and this tangled rabble resolved itself into a perpetual stream

of in-going Klondikers heading over the pass to take advantage of the yet open waterway from Linderman.

The tang of first frost was in the gray morning air as Britton pushed along the rough, bouldered wagon-road which runs up the Dyea Valley. Hundreds went, like him, on foot, while those blessed with a full money-belt procured what teamsters' wagons were to be had and lashed ahead in frantic haste that soon brought Canyon City in sight. From there to Sheep Camp the travel was more congested; the weaker men already began to lag; the first strain of the race told on the physically unfit.

All the way on to the Scales Britton passed faltering fellows, singly or in groups of twos and threes. They cursed him in a despairing way for his stalwart legs and sturdy back, and he came to recognize that here at last was a country where they measured a man according to his manliness, uninfluenced by extraneous attributes.

Where the trail ascended Chilcoot, the footing grew worse, and a mighty climb confronted those who would cross the pass. Britton's strength here stood him in good stead, for in addition to the arduous toil of the ascent there arose the handicap of a bitterly cold wind which began to filter through the mountains, carrying ominous snow-flurries. The icy blast numbed the climbers' muscles and sapped their energies, and as if conscious of its power, the northland loosed its lungs and blew a brawling storm down from the higher plateaus.

Minute by minute the shrieking wind increased in velocity, whirling sleet and snow in the faces of the toiling men, till their persons were encrusted, and the mountain path grew white and obscure. A gold-seeker slipped upon a rock ahead of Britton and rolled back against his legs. Rex pulled him up and turned him round. "Say, old friend, what do you call this?" he gasped.

"Holy road to Nome!" blasphemed the other, rubbing his bruised limbs. "Don't you know a blizzard when you meet one? Keep your mouth shut in this cold, or you won't make the pass."

It was indeed a blizzard of the roaring, ramping type that only the Yukon knows, and it increased to diabolical fury as the toilers reached the steepest pitch of the mountain. Men went down beside the trail in sheer exhaustion, and the agony of their position appealed more strongly to Britton on account of his inability to render any lasting aid. This, of all the northern trails, was the Iron Trail where none but the strong could survive.

Seeing old-timers and hardened sourdoughs fall behind filled Britton with a glow of pride in his own capabilities. He understood that he was one of the fit to whom reward must finally come, and the thought instilled new hope.

Over towering Chilcoot he climbed, in the teeth of that memorable blizzard which froze a score of gold-seekers between the Scales and the divide from Crater

Lake. Nothing but his magnificent physique and indomitable purpose carried him on, and when he staggered across the little glacier which sloped to Crater Lake he had won his way to the front, and was once more in the van of a stampede. As Britton thawed himself in the camp there beside a grizzled Alaskan who had followed every strike from Nome to Klondike City, the old-timer regarded him admiringly.

"You're the hot stuff, mate," he averred, "when you can heel old Larry Marsh over Chilcoot in that there hell-warmer. You're some stampeder, too! Wasn't you in the front 'long of me at Juneau and Glacier Bay?"

"I believe I remember you," Britton said, "although it did us precious little good to be in the front."

The old man warmed his hairy paws for the tenth time and shook his gray locks.

"Don't whine! Never whine, friend," he remarked. "You get experience, grantin' nothin' else. You're sure some stampeder, and I reckon they'll be namin' you 'long of Larry Marsh–him that named Marsh Lake!"

And forthwith Britton's name travelled widely in fulfilment of the old-timer's prophecy; they began to designate him as one of their stampeders, that much-respected minority of men who have the grit and the power to stay in the lead of the maddest of all mad races–the gold-rush.

The halt at Crater Lake Camp was, of necessity, very short. The stragglers were limping in, frost-bitten and exhausted, telling of some who would never come in, when Marsh and Britton again hit the trail. Dead men nor mountains, frosts nor blizzards, sufficed to stay the stampede.

The lower levels were strangely quiet after the bellowings of the windy pass, and the cold did not bite so keenly.

The rush passed on by Deep Lake and Long Lake, where fat purses could buy the assistance of pack-trains of mules as far as Linderman. When they reached the shore of this lake, they were twenty-eight miles from Dyea, with the giant bulk of Chilcoot looming between, its rugged head still wrapped in the swirling white blizzard.

From the head of Lake Linderman the boats, bought or built for different individuals, plied on the water-route which led by Lake Marsh and the Forty Forks onward to Dawson. There were small barges, but their sailings were very uncertain and could not be depended on in a rush. Each man who dared the waterway before the very maw of winter had to buy or make his craft at Linderman.

Here on the shore a motley throng congregated, with Marsh and Britton in the front ranks. Some Nevada capitalists who had lost their horses along the trail and hired Indian packers to carry their goods over the pass at sixty cents a pound, clamored for boats to a stocky Dane, who appeared to be a perfect genius

at turning out freshly sawn planks as the finished product, ready seamed and caulked, with mast stepped, and altogether seaworthy. However, something else beside clamor and a profligate show of money was necessary for the securing of the vessels, and that was time. Work as they might, the boat-builders could not supply the demand, and any with skill in carpentering fell to toiling of their own will in order to get boat after boat away and thus hasten their own turn. They were pitting human celerity and skill against the unceasing advance of winter. The freeze-up was approaching with chill, unpitying certainty to snuff out delayed hopes by the close of navigation, and through superhuman effort the gold-seekers thought to forestall the frost's advent.

Every day the march of Arctic feet could be defined more clearly; every night the snow-line slid a little farther down the hills; north-east squalls blew up at unexpected hours; and the rivers strained their waters through arrays of icy teeth stuck along the margins.

Amidst the turmoil of Linderman, when others had done with exhortations, expostulations, and entreaties, through the universal desire for speed, Larry Marsh drew one Danish boat-builder aside and conferred with him.

Whatever magic he used or whatever service of old needed repayment, Britton did not know, but he saw the Dane hand over a newly launched skiff to the gray Alaskan.

"Hey! you," the latter called to him, "come and steer this boat. You're the man for me!"

Britton threw in his outfit with glad promptitude, and they shoved off through the seething shore ice, which was ground to fragments as quickly as it formed.

"Keep her head straight," warned Larry Marsh. "I'll 'tend to this here sail."

He busied himself with the squaresail, a large sheet that caught the sweeping wind and whirled them down Lake Linderman like a flash.

A mile portage connected Linderman with the next lake, Bennett. The swift water was not navigable for large boats in the ordinary way, so Britton brought the skiff to in a manner which showed he was a skilful sailor and which Marsh did not fail to note.

"You've held a tiller before now, I'll warrant," he said. "Most greenies would have piled the boat up on them boulders in the rapid. Let's pack the outfits across and line her down to Bennett!"

Accordingly, having first portaged their goods, they lined the skiff carefully through foaming white-water down to Lake Bennett, where they again embarked. From the Police post at the head of the lake the sergeant was watching a Government courier struggling in with a Peterborough through the gale that raged. Britton and Marsh saw him also as they staggered under their press of sail.

"He's in trouble," Rex cried. "Hadn't I better run closer?"

The courier was paddling mightily, but the squall which had caught him half way up Bennett proved too strong. It was gradually defeating him in spite of his desperate efforts.

"It'll swamp him in a minute," Marsh declared, eyeing the helpless man. "I guess you'd better run past."

The skiff bore in toward the canoe just as a huge, white-capped wave threatened to bury it. The stout fellow met it bravely with a sweeping stroke. The spray hid the Peterborough's nose for an instant, and it seemed as if the craft would never rise.

"She's under!" shouted Britton.

"No, she lifts," cried his companion. "See, on the wave-top! By heavens, it's mountain-high! Snap!–there goes his paddle."

The blade had broken clean in two under the tremendous strain. The Peterborough spun round like a cork on the crest of the surf; the courier grasped for his spare paddle, knotted to the thwarts, but another wave capsized him before he could dip it.

Britton brought the boat's head round, and the skiff drifted past the spot. The drenched man clung desperately to the careening, upturned Peterborough. Britton jammed the tiller hard to windward, and Marsh cast a rope. It missed.

"Here," said Rex, "keep the helm down, and I'll catch him as we drift."

Old Larry took his place. Britton stretched himself on the gunwale, like a cat, and grabbed the drowning courier's collar as they rocked alongside. A powerful jerk, and the soaked fellow lay shivering in the bottom of the skiff!

He was a Corsican and spoke bad English. While they reeled down the thirty miles of Bennett before the screaming gale, he patted Britton's shoulder in gratitude.

"I must ask thanks–much thanks for you," he kept reiterating.

They beached the courier at an Indian camp by Cariboo Crossing and drove on through Tagish Lake. The wind veered and baffled them, and the seas gave them hours of icy baling. Britton did not count the tacks they made, but it must have been a hundred before they reached Tagish Post, where the boat was put in for good. The Englishman was not at all sorry to see it permanently tied up and to be free of its cramped quarters, although the skiff had served them such a good turn.

He stretched his toil-stiffened muscles and stamped about on the ice-piled beach, the Alaskan following suit. Rex thought the latter's face had a wan, tired look, and he realized how wearing were these desperate drives in the teeth of overwhelming hardships.

"I reckon we've got the rest beat by a long shot," Marsh observed. "Nevada

coin-slingers ain't in it with us! I know a short trail to Forty Forks by skirtin' Lake Marsh, so we can snooze at the Post to-night and hit it in the mornin'."

They slept in comfort for once, sheltered at Mounted Police headquarters, but before sunrise they were afoot and circling the first headland of Lake Marsh. Some hours after, the other boats began to arrive, and the land-rush was renewed with fresh vigor.

"What do you think of my namesake?" asked the Alaskan, as they turned east from Lake Marsh's shore.

Britton looked at the sullen sweep of white-crested water with the rubble of ice rattling on every wave, at the thickening films over the inlets, and at the ever-descending snow-line on the bleak ridges.

"I think it will be closed before thirty-six hours," he said.

It was a tyro's guess, and for the only time within the knowledge of Larry Marsh the tyro's guess came true. The next evening he saw the freeze-up and the death of many a man's hopes. The death of their own hopes crept round in a different way.

A mile below Forty Forks they met Jack McDonald, or "Scotty," as he was generally termed, a famous dog-musher of the Yukon, a skilled prospector, and a friend of Marsh.

"Headin' for the strike?" he asked in his broad Scotch accent. "Then ye maun turn aroun'. 'Tisna worth a dang."

Britton's eager look faded. Larry Marsh glanced up with sharp disgust.

"'Scotty'," he said, "you're not joking?"

"Joke, mon!" exclaimed McDonald. "I cam' frae Le Barge tae look ower the groun', an' yon dinna seem like a joke. I tell ye 'tisna worth a dang."

Marsh believed the announcement because it was uttered by the Scotchman. He relied on McDonald's judgment as he would on his own, and he turned about on the trail.

"That's gospel if 'Scotty' says so," he observed to Rex. "It's no use of us wastin' time. Back-trail's the word!"

Britton was loath to give up so near the goal when his expectations were so summarily scattered.

"It's only a mile to the new camp," he said. "I think I'll go on and have a look. One never can tell what may turn up."

Larry Marsh shouldered his pack-sack again.

"All right," he grunted. "Where you goin', McDonald?"

"South o' Le Barge," the Scotchman answered. "I had a trace there before I cam' awa' on this fool trip."

"I'm with you," cried Marsh, "and we'll follow it to the end." To Britton he added: "Come with us, and we'll put you in right if anything goes!"

The idea seemed vague and forlorn, and Rex shook his head.

"I'll glance over the Forks anyway," he decided.

They took the back-trail, and he tramped on. A week at Forty Forks was convincing enough! He returned to Tagish Post, a very downhearted man, and the first person he saw was the Government courier, Franco Lessari, whom he had pulled out of Lake Bennett.

"I ask much thanks–for you, much thanks," the Corsican greeted with a new show of gratitude. "For your kind heart I repay–so little. Listen! Far up Samson Creek, I tell you for go on the north branch. Look there for gold!"

Britton smiled indulgently. It was only another of the five hundred kindly hints which had been given him by well-disposed people; for well-disposed people never think that these vague pieces of information, very often acquired simply by hearsay, waste a man's time, by sending him off on false and useless scents. Britton had had plenty of such news, and he thought no more of it till he heard it whispered about the Post that there was something big on Samson Creek.

He learned, too, that Franco Lessari had quitted the Government service to go prospecting, and that lent more significance to what the Corsican had told him. When he went to bed that night, he counted the contents of his slack money-belt. There remained about enough to purchase a team of dogs, with some dollars left over for supplies. With his present means he could go on one more stampede. If he failed to strike anything, he would be stranded. Success or failure depended upon which direction he took. There was another rumor in the air, the tale of riches in the Logan Valley, and he did not know which way to turn. In his strait he remembered the fatalistic beliefs of the Arabs in Algiers, and flipped a coin to decide whether he should go on or turn back.

It fell heads–to go on–and Britton accepted the decision. Larry Marsh and McDonald had gone south of Lake Le Barge, so he purchased his dogs from another musher and set forth next day. The frost held lakes and rivers with two-foot ice, and the snow had fallen heavily for a week.

He worked across the frozen lakes; ranged the jammed curves of Thirty Mile River; and reached the ice bridges of the White Horse. The travelling was tedious, and he saved his dogs, going into camp every night at six.

At the Mounted Police post on the Big Salmon, Britton rested half a day, and then mushed along, undeterred by a filled trail, to the Little Salmon, Pelly, and Selkirk, making halts where he must.

Between Selkirk and Stewart River, when Britton pulled out at dawn, he could discern another team travelling behind him at a considerable distance. He watched it with interest because it was the first company he had seen on the trail since leaving Big Salmon, but the sled did not appear to come any nearer no matter how slowly he himself mushed.

"Who's behind?" asked the keeper of the roadhouse at Stewart River, when Britton passed through.

"Don't know," Rex answered. "He will not come close enough for examination."

"A shirker!" was the man's judgment on the laggard team, as he watched the Englishman's sturdy figure breaking the way to Sixty Mile.

CHAPTER VII.

Where the heavy trail from Sixty Mile forged toward Indian River, Rex Britton halted his dog-train and eyed with an odd glance, half relief, half reproach, the dog-sled which was now rapidly approaching from the rear.

"Humph!" he growled through his fur hood, "the gentleman of the rear-guard has a conscience after all. He apparently knows the unwritten law of the Yukon that travellers take turns in breaking the trail."

A fresh fall of snow had buried the Dawson route, and, unlucky as usual, Britton had found it his task to pack the loose stuff all the way from the Big Salmon. The other dog-train that had mushed behind him since morning had not offered to do its duty till now. The four o'clock gray was showing in the sky. Night lurked in the river shadows. Britton breathed his dogs a little longer and waited.

The sled behind was drawn by a five-dog team like his own, but the huskies appeared far fresher.

"Been nursing them while I've done the work!" was his exclamation–"mighty good driver, too. By George, it's a woman!"

Britton's wide eyes strained to catch the detail of the figure. As the distance lessened, his supposition was proven true. He saw the novel sight of a five-dog team being urged at full speed over that lonely trail by a mere slip of a girl.

"Gaucho, you lean beggar!" he cried to his leader. With a jump the animal tautened the traces to the shrill menace of the lash. The runners coughed a little in the sagging snow, and Britton was off down the slope.

"You see it's a girl, you old wolf," he whimsically explained. "We can't let her break a trail. No–not if we were dropping!"

Nevertheless his team travelled in a surly fashion. The skin on the backs of their necks crinkled at the shriek of his whip. They snarled and fought in their

harness despite the punishment which followed. The rear sled gained steadily. Soon a voice like a clear silver bell hailed Britton.

"Wait!" she commanded. "I'll take my turn. Your dogs are weakening. I should have come to the front sooner, only I must travel all night and need to spare my team."

"I'm all right," Britton shouted back. "Laurance's cabin is my stop. The huskies will last."

"I insist," the girl cried, urging her animals so that they nosed the packs on Britton's sleigh.

"And I refuse," he called over his shoulder. "You shouldn't be on this trail anyway. It's not safe to travel alone. You're surely not mad enough to attempt a night trip?"

The girl straightened her shoulders haughtily, and the face, framed in a white-furred hood, took on a dignity which would have been lost on the man had not the physical beauty of the countenance forced its impression.

"Let me pass!" she tersely commanded, pulling her dogs into the powdery snow at one side of Britton's packed trail.

"Pass me, then," he said, a little nettled, and forced his team to topmost speed.

Invited into a race, the girl soon showed the mettle of herself and of her animals. Before Britton reached the river-arm, she drew abreast. The trail sloped downward, and the dogs had but little to stay their lope. The two teams raced side by side, the leaders snapping at each other.

[image]

"The two teams raced side by side, the leaders snapping at each other."

"They'll fight in a minute and pile us both up," the girl cried excitedly.

Britton, gazing on her face, was struck with an old, poignant pain. For a second, he thought it was Maud Morris. The features were there; the same teeth, the same rose-hued cheeks, the same sunny hair about the temples! The resemblance was remarkable, and, forgetting the swift descent, Britton stared.

Gaucho, over-zealous to maim the rival leader, stumbled, and a spill seemed imminent, but Britton's skilful lash sorted him out, thereby increasing the momentum of the train till the teams rushed neck and neck again.

"It's a dead heat," he said grimly. "We had better slacken speed before we cross the ice or neither sleigh will go any farther."

"Agreed," smiled the hooded beauty, reining in. Her color was heightened by the ride, and, as she pushed the furry fringes from her mouth to admit of freer

breathing, Britton could have sworn it was the face of Maud Morris. Only, the eyes had a serene depth of expression which bespoke soul and purity. Therein lay the difference!

"Say," he began, confusedly, "you're like–you're the perfect mould of someone I know. Her name is Morris. Ah! I have it now! Such likeness can't exist without sisterhood. You're a sister of Maud Morris!" His voice was intense in its eagerness.

"I am not!" came the decidedly staccato answer, tinged with contempt. "Be careful," she added warningly. "There's a jam on this arm." They were sweeping the frozen river-bed, bumping over the jutting ice-boulders piled chaotically in a bend of the stream.

Britton took the lead, swinging briskly across the jam. The girl shouted a warning at his evident carelessness.

"Do be cautious," she begged. "The fresh snow masks the water-holes in treacherous bridges, and the current here is very swift."

Britton loped on without heed. The girl screamed, a second later. Without warning one runner of the foremost sled cut across a snow-arched slush-hole. Britton pitched backwards, splashing through the sloppy mask as a stone drops through scummy ooze.

The girl was at the place in three dog-leaps. A dull blotch of open water showed where the man had disappeared. She jerked her sled sidewise, as an anchor for her weight, grasped a runner with one hand, and lowered her body as far as possible, searching with despairing glances for a reappearing head. She gave a low cry of agony when nothing showed, and began probing wildly with her whip. Its butt-end fell across the taut ropes of Britten's sled, and, looking up, the girl saw the dogs in a heap, well-nigh strangled with the tension on the collars. There was something on the other end!

She grasped the ropes and pulled with all the strength of one arm. After what seemed an age of straining, Britton's black gauntlet pierced the slush. The lines were twisted tightly round his wrist, and the girl frantically seized it. However, the effort was useless. By the passiveness of the limb she knew him to be either stunned or drowned, and past helping himself, while her strength could not stir him.

Relaxing her grip, she pulled herself up the side of the hole, ran to Britton's team, and lashed it into activity in spite of the cramping collars. In terror the huskies responded with their supreme efforts, but they could not draw out their master.

In hysterical sobbing now the girl brought her own dogs, hitched them ahead, and slashed the double team till the cruel whip flayed their hides. To her blows she added prayers breathed between terrified sobs.

At last the string of tortured dogs broke out the sagging, anchoring thing, and Britton's senseless body rolled into view with startling suddenness. The animals, at the quick release, dragged it clear of the river before the girl could stop them.

Laurance's cabin showed just around the bend. In a new lease of strength the feminine rescuer rolled the man's body on his sleigh. Calling to her own team to follow, she made a dash for the shelter of the cabin.

The headland reeled away; the ice-gaps ran past till she drew up with a swirl in front of Laurance's. A group of suspicious huskies, guarding the door, howled dubiously and charged on the strange teams. The girl cracked skulls here and there in a frantic fashion. The fear that they might spring on the inert man possessed her, but in a second the clamor reached Laurance by his fire.

The door clanged back. Several oaths, puncturing the icy air like pistol-cracks, were swallowed in a ridiculous gurgle when the old Klondiker recognized the strange form as that of a woman.

"He's drowned!" she screamed. "Help him, for God's sake!"

"Who?" bellowed Laurance, rushing out and kicking dogs right and left. "By me oath, it's Britton, Rex Britton! Where'd you come on him, eh?"

"He fell in the river-jam!" she cried in unsuppressed irritation. "Don't talk–don't question! Do something! It's time that counts. You're losing time, man!" Her voice filed off in an upper break which told of racked nerves.

Laurance gripped Britton in his arms and made the house with some little difficulty. Rex was a heavy man, and a bulky fellow seems twice his own weight when the muscles are so lax.

"I don't think he's drowned near so much as stunned," Laurance observed, as he laid the body in a bunk behind the stove. "Something's hit him a hefty blow there." He touched Britton's forehead where a dark bruise showed.

"Nary a drown," he continued triumphantly, as he ran a hand under thick Arctic clothing to feel the breast. "His heart's a-beatin'. His ribs heave some, too. Nary a drown, I tell you. The crack on the coco done the job, miss. I'll bring him round all up-to-date in a minnit or two."

The girl's convulsive sobbing made Laurance look up in surprise.

"Don't you go for to take on so," he begged. "You go quiet your nerves and make summat hot in the kitchen room, for the cook's away. I'll dry-fix Britton, and he'll drink pints of scaldin' tea when he wakes."

The girl obeyed, eager to do anything that would help. She busied herself over the tea-making, and warmed some soup, made from moose shoulder, which she found in the rough cupboard. At intervals, however, her anxiety overcame her, and she called to Laurance in the next room with questions as to Britton's condition. Reassuring replies came back in the Klondiker's quaint vocabulary,

replies that made her smile when she could take her mind off Britton's danger, since Laurance declared there was no need to fear.

By the time she had the tea and soup ready, Laurance came into the kitchen.

"He's come to–sort of dazed, though," was his announcement. "Got them things hot?"

"Steaming!" she answered, turning from the stove. The action brought her face in close range of Laurance's eyes. The tears were dried, disfiguring sobs gone. The sparkle of the eye and the fire-tinged cheek made a rare sight. The old Klondiker gazed for a speechless minute, while the girl's color deepened.

"Say, now," he stammered at last, "if I'd never set eyes on the Rose of the Yukon, I'd take me oath as you was her. Blast me if you don't resemble her like a twin. Where're you from?"

"Dawson!–don't bother me," the girl replied quickly. "You are sure he will be perfectly safe? I wouldn't like to think–you see, I believe it was my fault. I tempted him to race. He will take no harm?"

"Nary a bit," said Laurance, promptly. "He'll be as right as a trivet when he gets outside a good hot meal."

"Then give him these as soon as you like!" She indicated the tea and soup, and added: "I'll thank you to tell him I'm sorry I was the cause of his accident. Just tell him I'm sorry."

Laurance caught up the boiling liquids in their respective vessels and darted into the next room. Rex Britton's senses were gradually steadying themselves. The hollow, rocky feeling was passing away. In a dry suit of Laurance's he half reclined on the Alaska bunk, while the Klondiker proceeded to administer to his needs by dipping out the necessary nourishment.

"Where's the girl?" asked Britton, awkwardly.

"Out in the kitchen! Say, isn't she a Jim-Cracker from Jim-Crackerville, eh? What's her name?"

"Don't know!" said Rex. "Why didn't you ask her?"

"Bless me,–I–forgot," admitted Laurance. "However, son, seein' as you're summat interested, I'll attend to this here enquiry–"

A jingle of bells and the movement of a dog-train outside clattered an interruption.

"Hello!" exclaimed Laurance, jumping up. "Someone else blew in, eh? Must be me day at home." He crossed quickly to the door and flung it open.

"Who's arrived?" demanded Britton.

"H–l!" cried Laurance, in a non-committal fashion, and dashed into the yard.

Vociferous shouting drifted in to Britton, and when the Klondiker reappeared, he asked with a shade of anxiety: "Anything wrong out there?"

"She's gone," spluttered Laurance. "She's hiked with that bloody fast team

of hers."

Britton leaped from the bunk to the doorway. Around the bend of the trail the girl's outfit was disappearing. Full of a strange thrill of disappointment and sense of indignity, he turned the blame on Laurance.

"You blasted fool!" he roared, angrily.

"'Tain't my fault," the Klondiker threw back. "How'd I know she was goin' to vamoose? Must ha' thought we wasn't respectable inhabitants."

"She said she intended to travel by night," explained Britton. "I told her it wasn't safe, but she laughed. I'm going after her!"

Jim Laurance put his back to the door with a certain grim determination.

"No, you ain't," he said, quietly. "Sift some sense into your cracked head. Them dogs are gee-whiners. Yours wouldn't catch 'em in a year. No, siree! That girl knows what she's a-doin'. She's been on trails afore this, and don't you forgit it."

Britton sat down upon his bunk again, convinced of the futility of trying to overtake the splendid team of the unknown beauty. Laurance came back from the door and replenished the fire. His friend drank the rest of the soup and tea in an absent manner.

"How do you shape?" asked Jim.

"Better," Rex grunted.

"Feel like a square meal? It'll skeer off the cold better'n slops. They're all right to prick your blood up, but they don't last like a stomachful of bull moose. Heh?"

"Hardly," Britton agreed. "Bring out your solid grub."

Laurance dived into the kitchen, returning with a big platter of moosemeat and a tremendous slab of pilot bread. He put on a fresh pot of tea, and they fell to, munching in silence while dark crept under the door and into the cabin corners.

CHAPTER VIII.

When the meal was finished, the cabin was wrapped in gloom. Laurance opened the stove door in order to save the expense of lighting a candle. In the Yukon smaller things than candles count for much. The firelight blocked out the two men's figures in a ruddy smudge of color. Britton's massive frame showed larger by a half than the wiry figure of Jim Laurance. But though not bulky, the latter's

muscles were of steel. His grizzled face was surmounted by stubby, iron-gray hair which met the up-creep of a disreputable beard in front of his rat ears. The stolid monochrome of a countenance was relieved only by the flash of two piercing blue eyes and the cherry-red hue of a snub nose. His lips were seldom seen; they clung incessantly to his pipe-stem under cover of the ragged whisker-growth.

Britton's face, on the other hand, was a finely moulded one; the harrying conditions and bitter routines of the North appeared to have only conserved and augmented its strength. A broad forehead, dark, fine hair above, regular features, with chin and cheeks clean-shaven, and white, even teeth showing when he smiled, made a pleasant picture in the flame reflection. His muscle-corded shoulders, sturdy neck, and square chin gave evidence of combined physical and mental strength.

For a time the men smoked in silence, staring into the coals, each busy with his own thoughts. Presently Britton spoke.

"Perhaps she'll stay at Ainslie's camp for the night," he said, more to himself than to his companion.

"Got the girl on your brain yet?" chirped Laurance, mockingly. "Kind of heroine of a fair romance, ain't she? Sort of angelic saviour sent for your special benefit, heh? 'Spose you'd a-dropped into that hole if she hadn't been around? Own up, now–honest Injun!"

"Can't say," evaded Britton. "I was thinking only of her safety. We're all pretty rough characters up here, but there are some d–d rough ones on this trail. At Stewart River they told me that someone was robbing caches by night between there and Dawson."

"The bloody cache-thief, or thieves," Laurance broke out–"they'll swing if we catch them! Anderson's cache, near Ainslie's camp, was sandpapered clean two nights ago–not a speck of anything left. It's jumping-off time for the man who did that–when they spot him!"

"Suppose now–well, I'd hate to think of the girl meeting one of that breed," Britton ventured.

"Don't you fear," laughed Laurance. "The man as puts hand on her will catch a whole-fledged, fire-spittin' Tartar. What did I see in her neat little belt when she loosed her coat in front of me fire? An ivory-heeled shootin'-iron, if you ast me. Don't worry, son. Wimmen as carries them things can use 'em. If you met her on the trail and was on evil bent she'd plug you quicker'n scat. You're d–d right. She can go through–if she wants to."

Something like a sigh heaved from Britton's wide chest. Laurance thought there was relief in it.

"On course," he bantered, "you was thinkin' of her safety. You certain had nary a thought of them red cheeks, them eyes, them lips–whoo!"

"Drop that!" Britton curtly ordered. "You know women aren't in my line."

"Where've you been these last weeks?" Laurance asked, suddenly changing the subject.

"Following a fool stampede up Forty Forks, beyond Lake Marsh."

"Hard luck again?"

"The worst." Britton's disconsolate tone told more than his brief answer.

"What's your latest idea?" his friend asked after a doubtful pause.

"I've word of something on Samson Creek. I'll outfit at Dawson and try for it. The Government courier gave me the hint at Tagish Post. I pulled him out of a cold bath he was taking in Lake Bennett once. He didn't forget it."

"Humph!" Laurance growled, reaching for more wood and stoking up after the old-timer's fashion.

"It's my last stampede," Britton continued in an odd, tense voice. "I'm nearly down and out, and I'm staking all. If I fail this time, it's back over this cursed trail to Dyea on beans and horsehide. I'll wash dishes in the scullery of a Puget Sound boat or do something of the like. If I fail, Laurance, I'll have seen the last of the Yukon."

"What brought you here, son?" asked Laurance, kindly. He leaned forward and put a hand on the younger man's shoulder. "What brought you to this God-forsaken Yukon?" he repeated. "I've heard of you playin' a hard-luck game on four stampedes. You've took the bumps right along like a vet'ran, but summat's agin you. You wasn't bred to this here. Your hands is too fine-shaped. Your head's too keen. Your speech is high-flown. Rex Britton, you turned your back on a better place in England than you'll light on here. I'm certainly certain of that. Tell me why you come, son?"

A new light gleamed in Britton's eyes. His stern countenance softened as under the influence of some far-away dream. He got up and paced the floor for a little. Finally, he flung himself back in the chair with an air of resignation.

"I've never told anyone here," he said, "but I'll tell you, Jim. Perhaps I don't need to say it; of course, it was a woman. The old, old story! I'm a strong man, Laurance, and I'd scorn to hold the feminine sex responsible for my vicissitudes. Still, as the philosophers have it, 'In the beginning it was a woman.' We'll go to the starting line. Listen!

"My family was one of the best in the old land. It consisted of three members, parents and myself. Both parents are dead–as you know. After graduating from college, I commenced a tour of the Orient, for recreation mostly. The patrimony left me was small, but I was heir to my uncle, who owns Britton Hall, the Sussex estate, and a post in the foreign diplomatic service was waiting for me when I should come back.

"Getting quickly to the point, I rescued a wonderfully attractive woman on

a sinking vessel in the harbor of Algiers. I believe I cracked some Berber skulls in the process, and got a knife-thrust through the shoulder muscles in return.

"She bound the wound, Laurance, and nursed it, lingering in Algiers for that purpose. Our meetings were hourly, you might say! I had my uncle's yacht at my disposal, and all the delights of the capital invited our participation, so you may judge that the days and nights passed very pleasantly.

"I had friends there whom I should have considered, but I neglected them in the other fascination; for it was fascination, Jim–the kind of beautiful web that the spider spins." Britton paused with a snappy intake of breath while Laurance, unwilling to interrupt, swung the stove door to and fro with a moccasined foot.

"You know the atmosphere of romance surrounding any such happening," Britton finally went on. "The lady was beautiful, marvellously so, in fact, and well versed in worldly artifice. I was still young enough to have the rainbow focus on life. The days went quickly in the picturesque port. The girl–she told me she was twenty-four and unmarried–remained in the place, recuperating from the shock of her accident. What's the use of elaborating, though! You know how a love dream grows, Jim Laurance. You must have had one somewhere in your own old, grizzled existence. Algiers is sunny. The flowers are fragrant there. Love feeds on sun and flowers, moon and mountains, starry nights, and all that. I was young, Laurance, and she was old in the craft. Could you blame me for being such a fool? Sometimes I hardly blame myself.

"For nearly a mouth things developed. We were engaged. That city by the Mediterranean became a Paradise for me. Then–then–" Britton's voice broke away in bitterness.

"Then what?" his friend prompted.

"Her husband came hunting for her!"

"H–l!" Laurance gritted. His feet fell to the floor with a bang. "She duped you!" he added, softly.

"Sheared the lamb," Britton, said, with severe, self-directed irony. "The whole affair came out. Her husband tried to shoot me. Instead, I laid him up for weeks. Then they came at me for damages, and the she-devil framed a charge of seduction. I was the sensation of courts and yellow journals for half a year. When I got clear at last, the attendant circumstances worked their effect. The thing smirched my name and killed my diplomatic chances. It ruined my life when it was brightest with promise. It caused my uncle to disinherit and wash his hands of me. That's why I cut the Isles, Laurance. That's why I'm here."

Britton rose to his towering height, with clenched hands, as if he were beginning the fight with the North, as if he were storming the Yukon's iron fastness for the first time. Laurance could picture him thus, setting foot on bleak Dyea beach. The old Klondiker took his pipe out of his mouth and forgot to replace it.

In lieu of that he reached a knotted fist to Britton's palm.

"Son, I'm sorry," he said. This from a hardened Alaskan was much, for in that country, as a rule, no one is sorry for any person but himself. There, in a running fight, it is every man for his own interests, and the devil take the laggards and the weak!

"Do you love her?" Laurance ventured, a second later.

"I'm cured," Britton laughed, bitterly. "Hasn't the draught been strong enough?"

The old man returned his pipe-stem to his lips. "Better a good burn-out," he mumbled, "the rubbish won't catch sparks agin. What was her name?"

"Maud Morris, wife of Christopher Morris," his friend answered. "I saw a man who knew them when I came through Winnipeg. He told me that Morris had gone all to pieces through drink and fast living. At that time they had come direct to Seattle. I don't know where they are now–and don't care to know!"

Britton settled back in his seat and refilled his pipe. The recounting of his story had been in some measure a relief, although the old taste of rancid memory remained.

"You're well out of it, son," Laurance observed, after another vigorous stoking of the stove. "You're bloody well clear, though you've stumped through such a hard-luck siege. I hope your last deal pans out some better. I'd hate to see you fall down. You're too good a man."

"Have you met Pierre Giraud lately?" Britton inquired. "I wonder if he'd join me. We've tramped many a trail together."

"Pierre's due here to-night," Laurance said quickly. "He won't join you, though. He has a fine thing toting the goods of some Dawson big gun out to Thirty Mile River. His royal nibs is going out–bound for the States–and he has Giraud under contract to pack him along."

"Too bad," Britton mused. "Pierre's worth three ordinary men en route. Many's the mile we've paddled, and many's the moose we've missed. *Bon camarade* is Giraud, if there was ever one."

"I saw him beat two blaggards on the stampede into Nome," Laurance began reminiscently. "The guys started in to argue the right of way with Pierre. Weighty beggars they was, too, but Giraud put 'em both out of action in ten seconds. Shiftiest man on the route, less it's yourself, Britton."

Rex shook his head as disclaiming the honor. Outside a shrill howl broke the night silence and started a hundred echoes. Rex lifted his head sharply.

"What's the matter with the husky?" he asked. "The moon's not up."

"Someone's coming," Laurance answered, listening intently to a musical sound.

The faint tinkle of bells grew clearer. The rushing sound of a laden dog-train

made the cabin walls vibrate.

"*Arrêtes!*" commanded a leonine voice in the yard, and the noise died suddenly.

"It's Pierre," cried Laurance, jumping to his feet.

CHAPTER IX.

The door was kicked open without ceremony, and Pierre's head popped in.

"Hello, you young cheechako!" yelled Britton, gaily.

"*Holá! mon camarade*, you tam ole stampeder!" cried Giraud, rushing in with outstretched hands. "By de gar, Ah nevaire t'ink Ah find you here. Ah s'pose you seex hondred mile back–*saprie*, yes." He pulled off his Arctic hood, disclosing a veritable voyageur's head, handsome, debonair, crowned with coal-black curls and lightened by the ever-changing play of his fine eyes, sombre-hued as his hair. Pierre's face was full of a certain reckless beauty, and riveted attention by his daring, wilderness-bred fascination. Camaraderie spilled out of his infectious laugh and his habitant speech.

Thus the two friends remained, the one sitting, the other standing, raking each other with volleys of cross-questions. They talked like a pair of chattering jays, trying to gather in the threads of the more recent incidents that had befallen each, till Laurance interrupted them.

"Sit down and eat," he said to Pierre, "I'll unhitch your team."

It was then the current of excitement, which Giraud appeared to have difficulty in suppressing, burst to the surface. He sprang to Laurance's side and caught his arm.

"*Non, non!*" he exclaimed. "Wait wan leetle w'ile. Ah breeng news. We want dat sled sure t'ing. De cache-thief–you hear of heem?"

Laurance's keen blue eyes flashed. "Is he pinched?" he cried, eagerly. "Have you seen him?"

Britton rose from his chair in vague alarm. He was thinking of the girl travelling alone over the trail. "Speak, Pierre," was his tart order, "you know something. Out with it!"

"You leesten den," Giraud began, excitedly. "Ah come by de cache on Silver Hollow *après* de dark she fall. Wat t'ink Ah find? De cache broken open. De stuff all gone to *diable*. Dat thief not ver' far away–Ah know dat for sure t'ing

by de tracks. Ah t'ink we get fresh dogs here an' catch heem–catch heem!" Pierre jumped about and flourished his brawny arms in emphasis.

"Anderson he geeve reward," he continued.

"How much?" Britton broke in, a new incentive gripping him.

"Wan t'ousand tollars to de mans w'at catch dis *canaille*–"

"Come on," roared his friend, jumping into his travelling-gear. "Come on, Pierre; we'll pull down that thousand."

He was at the door in a second, calling to his huskies. Giraud ran after, boiling with impatience.

"Hold on!" called Laurance. "Though I'd like to be in on this job, I can't leave my cabin–not with Mister Feather-Fingers dabbling about, and the cook's over at Stewart for grub."

"Jove! I forgot that," said Britton, hooking up his team. "It's rather a shame, Jim. We'd like to have you come."

"Can't," Laurance grunted, dismally. "Still, you can have my dogs. Snap 'em on ahead. If it comes to speedin', you'll catch a runaway easier." He ordered the big animals out, and Rex prepared to harness them ahead of his own.

"It's a long string," he said, dubiously. "They'll take some managing."

"Wait," commanded Pierre. "Ah feex dat. Ah have de double yoke."

He pulled a double pack outfit from his sled and selected the harness, tracing the dogs up in pairs. Three minutes more and they were gliding over the trail, leaving Laurance watching from the mellow blur of his firelit doorway.

"Did you meet a sled drawn by five dogs?" Britton asked, as they sped over the smooth plateau beyond Lauraucе's.

"*Oui*," answered Pierre. "Ah meet wan an' pass heem on de Grand Reedge."

"Stop?"

"*Non.* De mans nevaire speak. He hurry, mebbe."

"It was a girl!" said Britton, abruptly.

"*Ciel!*" gasped Pierre, in surprise. "Wat tell *moi*? She drive lak *diable*."

"Yes," Britton assented, "the dogs were very fast. She had mine beaten before we came to Laurance's. Of course, that was my stop."

Giraud's elbow gave a warning prod to his companion's ribs as they slid down Silver Hollow to the place which the voyageur had mentioned.

It was a cache built after the manner of the North for storing purposes or for preserving baggage for future freighting. Anderson had used it for years and had never before experienced any trouble with pillagers. Indeed, the inexorable law of Yukon miners was sufficient to make any of the light-handed gentry think twice before opening a cache. This was one of the crimes for which swift justice was meted.

Britton and the voyageur examined the snow-bound hummock carefully,

lighting a torch to scrutinize the tell-tale tracks in the wind-screened valley. The imprints were very fresh, and had evidently been made by one man with a dog-train.

During the momentary investigation Britton's thoughts revolved swiftly. From the amount of goods stolen, he judged that the robber did not intend travelling far. Probably he had in view some secret cache where he could hide the plunder till an opportunity of getting rid of portions of it should be presented.

"Did you notice the little cache by the stream when you came over Grand Ridge?" Britton asked.

"*Certainement!*" Pierre answered. "She be not touched. Ah look for dat."

"Then the fellow must be working on the in-trail. He never passed Laurance's. He never passed you. You're sure the fast five-dog team was the only one you met?"

"Tam sure," Pierre vigorously asserted. "Ah have de sharp eyes!"

"In that case he must have left the route somewhere between Laurance's and Grand Ridge. He wouldn't go far with such a bulk of stuff. We have to find his track where he left the main trail. The moon's just up. In ten minutes it will be as clear as day. This is our chance for five hundred apiece. We earn it between here and Grand Ridge. Whip up those dogs!"

Britton's tone was exultant. To the spice of adventure in running down a contemptible thief was added the lure of the reward which Anderson had offered. He needed that five hundred! In fact, it would be like money from home just at the critical juncture of his last stampede. His funds were barely sufficient to provide a proper outfit for the arduous trip up Samson Creek. This wind-fall–if the breeze held his way–would remedy the deficit in the budget.

Pierre, with all the craft of the old musher, had his dogs well in hand, and the long walrus-hide whip sang out with a final snap at the ears of the leaders that sent them loping like a whirlwind. The voyageur scanned one side of their route for any signs of a dog-train having turned off the beaten path. Britton watched the other side closely. The brilliance of the moon turned the whole frozen expanse of country into a white blanket, with here and there a soiled spot, which was the dark-green of scrubby thickets.

The rush of frosty air bit the men's cheeks. Odd little cadences, torn out of fleeting space, whined shrilly in their ears. White smoke of dog-breath blew back in cloud patches to mingle with the hoar of their own lungs. The exhilarating, electrifying flight through the Arctic atmosphere made the blood rush with all its virility through their lusty veins.

"We must be nearing Grand Ridge," Britton said at last, in a low tone. "Nothing has left the trail on my side so far."

"*Non*," muttered Giraud, "she be de same on dis side."

Britton was lying out as far as possible, watching past the dogs as they swung down by the little cache near the Ridge. Suddenly he uttered a half-suppressed exclamation.

"The rascal's left the trail here," he confided to Pierre. "Hold on; we're past it. Rein in your dogs. There, off to the left! That's his track. It leads down to the little cache. I can see something moving. Maybe the beggar's looting it, too." He stood up, balancing himself deftly in order to see the better. Acting on a swift impulse, he threw his hands up to his mouth in trumpet-fashion and gave a loud hail.

"Hello!–the cache," he bawled. "Who's down there?"

An oath came back in answer. There was a scuttering through the snow, the frantic cracking of a whip, whining of punished dogs, and the desperate rush of a loaded sled.

"Caught red-handed!" roared Britton. "Cut him off, Pierre. He's trying to make the beaten trail."

Giraud whipped his dogs up, running at an angle to the fugitive dog-train. The plunderer had reckoned badly in trying this mode of escape. His one team and laden sleigh struck only a snail's pace compared with the speed of Pierre's double team and empty sled. The voyageur's mad driving caught him before he reached the main trail. Whooping aloud, Pierre drove his galloping animals right on top of the other's dogs, anchoring them there in the loose side-snow to snarl and battle in the traces.

Britton and the voyageur leaped off and made for the piled-up packs on which the strange driver was seated. Realizing that he was thus suddenly brought to bay, the fellow rose to his feet and whirled the butt-end of his whip aloft. "Stay back, curse you!" he cried.

"Better give in," Britton warned him. "It's best for you." He jumped upon the rear bundles of the sled.

A vicious blow of the whip was the answer, but Rex was watchful. He caught the descending wrist, back-tripped the ruffian with a swift leg movement, and choked resistance out of him.

"I think he'll be quiet now," he said to Pierre. "Strap his limbs. That will do. Let's have a look at him." The moonlight failed to reveal much of the man's appearance except that his face looked more like that of a beaten dog than anything else.

"Smells like a distillery," Rex commented, turning his nose away. "He's been well primed for this job."

"Were we tak' heem?" asked Pierre, more material in thought.

Britton considered the matter for a short moment.

"We'll have to take him back to Laurance's and watch him by turns," he finally said. "I can pack the rascal on to Ainslie's Camp to-morrow and collect

my half of the reward from Charlie Anderson. He can pay you a like amount on your return trip from Thirty Mile. How does that suit?"

"*Bon*, for sure t'ing," Pierre returned. "Ah t'ink dat suit me bully. Mak' de five hondred ver' easy."

"Anderson will think it's well worth it for the return of his goods with the gentleman on top," observed Britton. "Turn your outfit, and I'll load this Whiskey-John into the empty sleigh. Whoa! Easy–that's correct, *bon camarade*! Go ahead now. I'll follow with the contraband."

There was no jingle of bells, nothing but the sober plunging of the sleds as the two dog-trains filed back to Laurance's cabin on Indian River.

CHAPTER X.

"So you've captured the condemned parasite!" cried Jim Laurance, as the returning ones reached his yard.

"*Certainement*! tam sure t'ing," Pierre assured him, with a burst of good humor. "Wat Ah tell you?–we catch heem! *Saprie*, yes–on de leetle cache *par le* Grand Reedge–*n'est-ce-pas*, Rex, *mon camarade*?"

"That's correct," laughed Britton, "we hit it just right! A little later and we should have had a stern chase. Make a jail, Laurance, to hold the rascal."

"Roll him in by the stove," ordered Jim. "He won't give us any ha-ha. I'll bet me best mukluks on that." Presently, as the man was taken inside and the bonds loosed, he added: "Don't calculate for a minnit you can vamoose–for you truly can't. Me Winchester'll stop such tom-fool notions." Laurance pointed to the sinister-outlined rifle above the door.

When the light fell upon the captive's features, the two men who had brought him in recoiled involuntarily.

"*Le diable*!" hissed Giraud, as if some hideously unpleasant truth were forcing its utterance in spite of him.

"The devil!" echoed Britton; "that's it, Pierre. No more fitting description could be given. Look at the high cheekbones, vulture-shaped features, and hellish eyes. Good Lord, Jim, did you ever see such an ugly man?"

Rex backed to a seat and began to divest himself of his outer garments, all the while regarding the cache-thief with critical eyes in which a light of discovery was dawning.

"Looks like a cross 'tween a 'Frisco wharf-rat and a Nome claim-jumper," Laurance averred. "Say, mister, was you ever forty-second cook round a scullery?–'cause you smells it!"

The captive vouchsafed no reply. He sat with his Satanic-shaped head buried between narrow shoulders. The firelight licked his face at intervals, strengthening its horrible grotesqueness.

"W'iskey mak' heem talk," Pierre declared. "Got de fire-wataire, M'sieu Laurance?"

"Yes," said Jim, "but it's too blasted dear to waste on that trash. I wouldn't give him Seattle sas'priller. Don't matter a crow-bait whether he talks or not. He'll get his own at Ainslie's to-morrer."

Britton came to the stove and gazed earnestly at the huddled heap on the floor.

"Look up, man," he said roughly, but the bloodshot eyes refused to meet his own.

"It's no use," Rex continued, with a cynical laugh. "I know you–Morris!"

The sudden revelation had its effect. The man sprang up with a snarl of rage. His eyes glittered malevolently––straight into Britton's now. He appeared about to fly at his captor's throat.

Pierre, ignorant of the cause of the thief's sudden activity, likened him to a gaunt wolf at bay before a big bull moose. So the pair seemed.

"I think he will talk," Britton said slowly. "He knows who I am now. Yes–I think he will talk."

"D–d if I do," came from the thief. The first words he had spoken sounded like a husky's gurgle when the collar nearly chokes him.

"Don't be so fast with denial," urged Britton, smoothly. "When you have heard the option, perhaps your opinion will suddenly change." He looked at Laurance for an instant, debating with himself. The Klondiker was in a deep and apparently uninterested silence.

"It's Morris, Jim! Christopher Morris–the man I spoke of, you remember? His attitude just now is suspicious. I don't know how long he has been in the Yukon, or what he is doing here, but I cannot understand his present escapade. There's something behind it." Britton paused and allowed his keen, searching glance to wander back to the repulsive figure of Morris.

"I was about to give you an option," he resumed. "I think Laurance will second my guarantee of a lightening of the punishment the miners will hand out. My proposition, in brief, is this: Tell us what you know, what your game is, who is behind you, and what is their object–tell us this, I say, and you'll only be flogged instead of hanged."

Britton's meaning came out clear and sharp to the victim of drink. He shiv-

ered a little and pulled himself to his knees. There was a hint of supplication in the position, but this his captor ignored.

Laurance coughed apologetically, in expiation of his silence.

"You want to make sure of that?" he questioned.

"Yes," answered Rex. "I know Morris through and through. In my long battle in the courts I came to read the man like a book. I can sense his subtleties and under-purposes. I learned to do that, Jim, in the hardest school of the world–the law-courts. I am almost certain that he is in league, or worse–in bondage. Shall we guarantee him this?"

Laurance consulted his pipe for a long minute. Then he flashed up his eyes in acquiescence.

"Go ahead!" he grunted. "I guess we can make it even with Anderson."

Britton confronted Morris once more, and drove his words home with sledgehammer effect.

"Take your choice!" he said. "Keep silent and hang–you know they'll do it at Ainslie's–or speak and get off with a flogging. Which? And be quick! We want to sleep here. Half the night has already gone."

Morris, the derelict, instinctively felt himself on the edge of things. His wits were not yet so liquor-dulled but that he could see the fate awaiting him at the camp. He knew the stern code of the North–rough but effective. Fortune had played him a miserable turn, and, if he did not catch at the proffered hope, she would sing his death-knell, rollicking heartlessly.

He collapsed suddenly from his kneeling posture and half lay on the rough floor within the stove's circle of warmth.

"What do you want to know?" he asked doggedly.

"Are you prepared to speak plainly and truthfully? No lies, remember!"

"Yes, that is–"

"No parleying," roared Britton. "I want some sleep for the trail to-morrow. You have to tell all I want to know in five minutes or not at all. Ready?" His words dropped bullet-like.

"Go on," Morris cried, with an assumption of recklessness; "d–d if I care. And hell take the other fellow. It's a case of life or death. Open up, Britton!"

"When'd you come?"

"By boat last summer to Dyea and thence to Dawson."

"Wife with you?" Britton's teeth ground over the sentence.

"Yes," was the sneering answer.

"For what did you come?"

"Gold!"

Rex Britton laughed harshly. "To be picked up anywhere, anyhow!" was his comment. "By man and wife–mostly by the wife!"

His tone, however, changed to a cold, metallic timbre when he asked:

"Who planned this cache game?"

"Simpson."

"Good heavens!–he's here, eh? Still," with another harsh laugh, "I might have known that when your wife was in the vicinity."

Turning to Laurance, he explained: "Simpson is a lawyer–counsel for Morris in the case against me–and an especial friend of Mrs. Morris."

"What does Simpson want?" was his next question to the tool.

"Money," said Morris.

"That's a lie," cried Britton, advancing fiercely. "He wanted the goods and supplies for a purpose. Money's procured by him in an easier way. But stampeders' supplies have no pecuniary equivalent in Dawson now. You see there hasn't been a steamer up-river for long enough. They tell me Dawson has been lately iron-bound. Now let us know what Simpson was going to do with the goods. You'll swing if you don't."

"He's going to prospect."

"Where?"

"On–on Samson Creek, where the rest are going."

"Big outfit for one man, isn't it? The contents of three caches!" Britton's casual remark held a taunt and a hidden meaning.

"He's taking men with him–to stake other claims for him. That's why–"

"Ah! I see," Britton interrupted. "When does he leave?"

"Right away."

"Funny act, that," put in Laurance, with a smile and wink.

"Yes," Rex agreed, the smile reflecting itself on his wholesome face. "Morris, you're only a fool in this country, and you can't see much significance in your statements. I take the liberty of telling you that there is a great significance in those few words. Old-timers have no difficulty in seeing far. Simpson, by the way, must have become more rapidly acclimatized–or else he has been at the game in other mining territories. Pierre, what motive has the man who organizes a toughs' stampede ahead of the spring rush to ground which is partially staked?"

"He t'ink he joomp de claims," asserted Pierre, promptly. "Dat tam sure t'ing!"

Laurance laughed at the sudden start and guilty shrinking of Morris.

"Why, a kid could spot that," the old Klondiker assured him. "Simpson, this law-juggler as Britton speaks of, gets the nerve to jump likely claims on Samson Creek. It's just as well he's found out. If he had per-sum-veered he'd surely got jumped hisself–at the jumpin'-off station. I'm certainly certain of that! How-sum-do-ever, as me friend here goes vamoosin' into Dawson shortly, he'll put a handspike in Mr. Simpson's choo-choo gear."

Britton got up and shook himself as a great, shaggy bear stretches its muscles.

"That's all for to-night," he yawned. "The saggy trail made me sleepy. But take my advice, Morris, and cut away from Simpson. You're not bound by ties unbreakable–yet you soon will be. And that's saying a good deal if you stop to analyze it. Let's roll up, Pierre!"

"*Oui*," cried Giraud, slinging out the blankets. "Ah dream w'at Ah get wit' dat five hondred." In the height of his buoyancy he broke forth in song, and, while Britton dropped to sleep, Pierre's voice rang up to the ceiling in the tune:

"En roulant ma boule roulante,
En roulant ma boule–
Derrièr' chez-nous y-a-t-un 'ètang
En roulant ma boule!"

CHAPTER XI.

A great commotion stirred Ainslie's camp on the following afternoon. The narrow passages, called streets, between ugly log and canvas buildings were thronged with heterogeneous concourses of miners and others. They moved back and forth along the pounded trail from restaurants and stores to the bunk-houses, from bunk-houses to dance-halls or riotous saloons, and an air of expectancy pervaded the movements of everyone within the camp's confines.

Outside Anderson's cabin the crowd began to concentrate, talking in incessant murmurs, while all eyes were fixed upon the closed door. A trial was going on inside. The news had spread through Ainslie's that the cache-thief had been taken and was now up before a miners' meeting. Word passed from man to man, and the throng continually grew in volume.

Presently Anderson's door swung open. Those who had sat in tribunal poured out with the prisoner in their midst.

Jim Laurance inhaled a deep breath and drew the fur cap down over his damp brow as he slouched along beside Rex Britton.

"That was a close thing," he growled. "Don't ast me no more to stick in me chin for a slim-finger! I don't much fancy these free-for-all fights."

It was evident that the discussion inside had waxed hot and that only a

slender margin saved the neck of Chris Morris.

The latter walked, with bent head, inside the solid phalanx of grim miners, among whom burly Charlie Anderson was chief. The face of Morris showed ashy gray in fear, and his eyes rolled back like a negro's as he shambled along, gazing at the ground, because the thought of looking for an avenue of escape was worse than futile.

The waiting mass of people gave vent to long-suppressed expectancy when Morris appeared. A loud shout rose up, and everybody rushed after the cordon which surrounded the cache-thief. It moved to the centre of the camp, where a large hitching-post, bearing a red cloth sign advertising Laggan's dance-hall, stood up at the side of the winding trail that served for Main Street.

The impatient spectators ranged themselves in lines that broke and shifted as they strove for better vantage-ground. Some, to obtain a clearer view, ran and climbed upon the low roofs of the log cabins, upon the verandah of the dance-hall, and the porch of a store just opposite. Women were mixed in with the male gathering, some with knee-length skirts and fringed leggings, and others dressed outright in men's garments.

On every hand was unpitying condemnation for the thief. He was scowled at and spat upon, for pillaging is considered the most contemptible thing in the North.

When the cordon halted at the hitching-post, Morris received a rude jostling from the crowd till Charlie Anderson forced the encroachers aside.

"Lynch him! Lynch him!" was the cry, vociferated in a deep, guttural roar which made Morris tremble.

Anderson shook his head and bellowed at the bystanders.

"No, boys," he shouted, "we're going to do as Laurance says and give him a chance. Make room, there!"

The sullen onlookers obeyed, leaving an open spot at the post which held Morris and another man, a thick-set fellow with a walrus-hide whip in his hand. Tense silence oppressed the spectators, contrasting strikingly with their former growls of impatience.

"Strip!" commanded the hard voice of Anderson.

Morris removed his outer coat, or parka, and a woolen vest.

"Go on," was the curt order.

The buckskin shirt came off, and the thick Arctic undergarment. He stood, bare to the middle against the cutting breeze, shaking from both cold and fright.

"Now," said Anderson, nodding to the stout man with the whip, before he stepped back among the gaping people.

The man tied Morris to the post by his wrists, took up a position four feet from the prisoner, and applied the whining lash.

Half a dozen times it descended, flaying the flesh, while not a sound arose from the crowd. At the seventh stroke, Morris groaned, pitched forward, and hung limply in his fetters.

"That's enough," cried Britton, vehemently. "Can't you see he has fainted?"

A team of horses pulled up with a jangle of bells in the trail. Some woman's gauntlet, flying through the frosty air, struck Rex a stinging blow upon the cheek.

"Ho! ho!" laughed a coarse fellow at his elbow, "so the Rose of the Yukon's down on you, eh? Or maybe it's a love-tap."

Rex looked between the disordered ranks of roughly-clad miners straight into the flaming eyes of Maud Morris, where she sat behind Simpson's spanking grays, in Simpson's luxuriously robed sleigh, beside the fur-coated, well-groomed Simpson himself.

Her furious glance transfixed Britton and then darted off, tangent-like, to the clamorous group on his left, where three miners had revived Morris with a stimulant and assisted him to an erect posture.

The bare back of Chris Morris was a raw, red patch, and he quivered convulsively as the sifting hill-wind bit into the bleeding stripes, while his custodians replaced shirts, vest, and parka upon his body.

Maud Morris's second glove followed the first, striking Britton rudely in the mouth.

"You beast!" she screamed impotently. "This is your doing, I hear!"

Rex ground the gauntlets into the beaten, tobacco-stained snow under his feet.

"Be thankful that Morris lives," was his heated answer. "They swore he must swing and fought against the commuting of his sentence. It was a tight pinch, but Laurance and I managed to pull it off at last."

The miners led Morris past and bade him take the trail.

"Hit it fur the high places," they said, "an' don't never show yer mug in this camp agin, or, s'help us, we'll shoot ye like a dawg!"

It was justice, the stern, unsmoothed judgment of the North, and Morris, the derelict who had reached the lowest limit of his downward tendencies, stumbled along the trail in the direction of Dawson, a marked man in the eyes of all.

His wife by law looked to Britton as he had last seen her in her boudoir at the big English hotel on the Mustapha Supérieure in Algiers. Her face was the same bright, hard mask of hatred, and her soulless eyes burned. He noted that she was looking older, her stamp becoming more brazen, her beauty lessening, because the dust of fascination no longer blinded his vision. The presence of the girl he had met by Indian River dwelt in Britton's mind, a presence moulded in a confusingly exact counterpart of Maud Morris. He remembered her fresh, childish innocence and pretty modesty, and he knew that in outward perfections alone the

counterpart equalled the original. While he surveyed the woman before him, he was certain that the straightforward character of his unknown was as different from Maud Morris's deceptive disposition as chastity is different from shame.

The knowledge was very consoling to a heart still void, and Britton wondered, with an involuntary throb, if he would ever find the nameless girl who had saved his life on the Indian River ice-bridge.

"You look as if I were someone else with whom you are genuinely pleased," Maud Morris said savagely, shrewdly reading his expression.

Britton's whole countenance lighted as he smiled.

"Do I?" he asked pleasantly. "That is because I have found your superior!"

She bit her lip to check an unwomanly expletive, and the mantling red in her cheeks gave Britton full satisfaction. He strode to Grant Simpson's side of the sleigh and tapped the sleeve of his rich, fur-lined overcoat.

"By the way, Simpson," he warned, "don't try that game on Samson Creek. It was quite a frame-up you planned for those who have already staked in, but Morris gave it all away."

Grant Simpson squirmed among the bear robes in a startled fashion, and his thin, effeminate face lost color.

"What do you mean?" he demanded, scanning Britton narrowly.

"Only this–if you dare show your nose on the Creek for any reason whatever, I'll tell the miners things that will make them swing you higher than Moosehide Mountain. Of course, Morris can't go in on any strike now. They wouldn't countenance it for a moment!"

Simpson's awe gave way to blind anger. He struck at Britton with his silver-mounted whip, to find it promptly torn from his grasp. Rex touched the grays on the flanks with it, and the team dashed down the Dawson trail with Simpson sawing on their heads. Britton laughed harshly as they went, and slowly broke the whip to bits.

"Simpson and Miss Vanderhart have given the chump a lift," said a miner, watching in the roadway.

Rex saw that the occupants of the sleigh had taken up Morris and concealed him among the fur robes.

"Who did you say?" he asked the miner.

"Simpson and Miss Vanderhart," the man repeated. "They're big guns at Dawson. Know them?"

Britton laughed again at the alias, as he scattered the whip fragments with his toe.

"Yes," he said meditatively, "I know something of them."

Just then Laurance swung out with his dog-train, starting back to Indian River.

"I'm off, son," he cried to Britton. "Are you goin' to bolt for Dawson? It's five hours from here!"

Rex nodded at the sleigh, gliding leisurely along the trail in the distance, and observed:

"I'll wait! I'm not anxious for their company on the route, and morning will suit me as well. So she's the Rose of the Yukon!"

"Sure!" said Laurance, putting his dog-whip in his armpit in order to light the inevitable pipe. "Kind of romantic fiction, ain't it, to find she's your angelic ideal? Haw, haw!"

"She's not, for there's no bandage over my eyes now," Britton declared, with conviction. "But, by heaven, there is an ideal," he continued in strange triumph evoked without volition, "and I feel in my bones as if I'll meet that ideal some time again."

"Um!" puffed Jim Laurance. "Again? Yes, I may say again! But take an old-timer's advice, son, and see that you stick to one search at a time. You understand?"

"I couldn't forget that if I wished to," Britton replied, smiling rather bitterly. "I'm going up Samson Creek at once. If that search doesn't prove worth while, there won't be any necessity for the other."

Laurance gripped Britton's palm tightly, saying: "You know where to come if stranded, son."

The negative motion of Britton's head showed the pride that prompted his refusal; and Laurance shook out his leader.

"Best luck!" he cried cheerily.

"For what?" Britton whimsically asked.

"For the gold and for–the–the other," Jim Laurance called over his shoulder. "Why, d–n me, you deserve 'em both."

CHAPTER XII.

Loping out of Ainslie's through the cold Arctic dawn, Britton made Dawson under five hours. Thanks to the recommendation of Charlie Anderson, he was able to secure from an outfitter a portion of the provisions that were being so scrupulously reserved because famine threatened in the distance with empty claws closing over the golden city.

He did not run across Morris, his wife, or Simpson, but he had the pleasure of eating dinner in a restaurant run by Pierre Giraud's wife, Aline. The place was a neat, clean eating-house, called the Half Moon, situated near the North American Transportation & Trading Company's store, and Pierre's wife proved to be a bright-eyed, buxom woman, young and attractive after the type of the French-Canadian maids. Rex thought it was the best meal he had had in a long time, with the additional virtue of having a dainty server, and he told Aline Giraud so.

"*Vraiment*," she cried, laughing gaily at his praise, "M'sieu' ees reech in w'at you call–compleement!"

"Yes, but that is about the extent of my riches," Rex chuckled, as he took his departure.

News of the Samson Creek find was freely circulating in Dawson City. Some claims had been staked in the fall, and hazy descriptions of the valley's wealth were in the air. The Arctic temperature of the Yukon winter kept many from going out to locate, but a mysterious rumor arose that there was a claim-jumping scheme afoot, and Britton found that it had already travelled ahead of him. The rumor, quite indefinite in itself, startled the people of Dawson from their apathetic state. Miners who had, at the approach of frost, forsaken the valuable auriferous workings for the city's beer-saloons drew on their meagre stores of supplies and stampeded to their holdings, ready to prove, even in gun-fights as a last resort, that possession was not nine points but the whole of the law.

Learning that so many prospectors had rushed out the night before, Britton loaded his camp stove, sleeping-bag, and tent upon his sled, securely lashed on the provisions, consisting mainly of bacon, beans, flour, and dried apples, and made all haste away.

Samson Creek was a tributary of the famous Eldorado, and on account of its proximity to fully exploited fields offered great promise of pay dirt.

Britton took the ice-trail up the frozen Klondike, veered off to the right, and rounded the great, cone-shaped, snow-laden mountain in whose chasms the most noted gold streams, including the Bonanza, have their origin. He travelled fast, unimpeded by snow-crust on the white, glistening surface of the river, and on nearing the south branch of the Samson, overtook many who had started out before him.

"Got anything staked?" panted a miner, as Britton went by.

"Not yet," Rex answered.

"Then you can't get in," the man said.

"Why?" Britton cried impatiently.

"Why?" echoed his informant. "Ge-mima!–why? Look there!"

They had topped the glacial slope of the watershed and paused for breath

upon the crest, overlooking the creek's bed. Britton beheld the valley, freshly staked as far as his eye could reach, with endless processions of men moving upstream.

"Get in?" said the miner. "Not much! I must hike down and see nobody squats on the claims I took last fall."

The man moved off, and Britton, angry disappointment raging within him, stood and watched the burden-bearing lines below.

Over on the west where the mountains bulked up so huge and taciturn, the ruby sunset was coloring the summits. Dull, spotless snow-cornices and shining ice-fields gleamed with rosy hues that gradually deepened to rich crimson, as if some Titan hand had poured over them a flood of ancient wine. The glacier tips scintillated like the steel sabre-wall of a cavalry column, and the scraggy hemlocks on the peaks quickened with sapphire glints against their sober green.

Britton watched the magnificent panorama hold its glory for some moments; then all turned shaded and blue in a trice as a sheer rock precipice capped the lens of the sun.

He turned away, dejectedly, toward the north branch, remembering the hint of Franco Lessari, the courier. He crossed South Samson, intercepting scores of men who mushed dog-teams, dragged Yukon sleighs, or bore great loads on their wet backs. They strained in single file up the beaten river-path–low-browed, cruel-looking fellows who might have been thugs and who cursed those that delayed them; eager-faced, unbroken fools who had come in by steamer in the heat of summer, housed themselves warmly in Dawson when the frost fell, and had yet to learn the smiting wrath of a Klondike blizzard; luckless gamesters whom a winning turn never blessed; and shrewd old pioneers, suspicious of everyone, noting everything with keen, wilderness-trained eyes, and pushing on indefatigably to conserve their fall stakings. Along the sinuous river course heaps of boxes and sacks and caches of food marked the journey; overweighting baggage, thrown down to await more convenient handling, blotched the ice with unsightly disorder; discarded trifles, pack rubbish, and the snarl of sleigh and tent ropes littered all the route.

By dark Britton camped on North Samson, four miles away. There, for three days, he burned holes in doubtful-looking gravel, enduring uncomplainingly the manifold discomforts of tent life with the mercury fifty below.

Meanwhile, the influx to the south continued, and, all the explored stream being taken, the overflow reached the northerly branch. Rex watched them come, more motley and dishevelled than ever, unwilling to back-trail to Dawson and yet with a secret dread gnawing at their hearts, the fear of winter's lash whose torment the ache of hunger might assist. He saw them arrive, as bitter and despairing as himself, and with them staggered Franco Lessari, dragging the most meagre of

meagre outfits.

Lessari had no sleeping-bag, only blankets. and thin ones at that; he did not carry a tent, depending upon the snow hut dug in the river drifts, and his food was a bag of coarse beans and dried salmon.

"Ah," he cried delightedly, on seeing Britton, sitting between his tent flaps, "you listened at me? But come to-morrow after me. Where I say, you dig!"

He was moving farther up-stream, but Rex called him back.

"Look here," he began, full of commiseration for the pathetic figure plainly in worse circumstances than himself, "you might as well bunk in beside me. There's plenty of room in the tent, and we'll prospect together wherever you say. If you're going to share a good thing with me, I must make some return. Come along! Throw in your packs."

Gratitude showed in the Corsican's brown, harrowed face as he wrestled with his limited English vocabulary in the attempt to thank Britton for the generous offer, of which he reluctantly took advantage.

"You are so much kindness," he sighed repeatedly.

In the morning they shifted their camp another mile up North Samson to a certain bend near an icy ravine, called Grizzly Gulch, where, Lessari said, a trapper had declared he had found good gold-signs. For three days more they burned out the beach and excavated the frozen gravel without success. The trapper must have been mistaken, or they had struck the wrong spot. They branched out with their operations and covered the dip of the ravine in all directions, but their ill success proved unvarying.

The bed of the gulley lay pock-marked with burned holes, and the dump outside the tent grew large. It was after weeks of this trying toil that Rex Britton discovered Lessari's one vice.

Rex came in one night from a late probing in Grizzly Gulch to find an Indian of the Thron-Diucks keeping company with the Corsican by his camp stove. Both men were joyously drunk, and they hailed Britton as a welcome returned prodigal.

The Thron-Diuck held up an empty bottle which had, no doubt, been dearly bought from some trafficking miner, and lamented the absence of whiskey in woeful Indian jargon. Lessari jumped to his unsteady feet, attempting to embrace Britton and dinning in his ears a hopelessly mixed tale of gold.

"Gold, gold, gold!" he would cry, dancing aside to pat the Indian on the back. "Him tell where gold for give him whiskey."

"Yes, Mis'r," the Thron-Diuck volunteered, ingratiatingly. "Give whiskey! Me tell where big gold come from–heap much gold."

Britton laughed mockingly.

"That tale's too old," he said. "I've heard of the combination of the drunken Indian, the bottle of whiskey, and the golden valley ever since I started on these

cursed northern trails. Now, if you want to sleep by our fire, you'll have to stop shouting. I wouldn't turn a dog out upon a night like this, but you must be quiet. Understand?"

He made Lessari sit down, and kicked the Indian's emptied bottle out of the tent.

"You'd sell your big gold pretty cheap," he commented drily.

"Think me lie?" the vagrant cried aggressively.

Rex could see that he was at that stage peculiar to red men's intoxication when they will sell their bodies or souls to satisfy the abnormal craving of their unbridled natures. The whiskey's flame licked through his veins, and there was no checking the thirst for fire-water which only drunken insensibility could satiate.

"I think you are imagining things," Rex replied, "and I have no whiskey to spare in barter. A mouthful of what you two wasted might have been useful some time in saving a life in this deadly cold."

"Me no lie," the muddled Indian persisted.

"You do," said Britton, with pointed sternness.

The Thron-Diuck's fingers fumbled in his rags for an instant and came forth closed.

"Think me lie!" he shouted dramatically. "Heap big gold–like that!"

From the Indian's extended palm, the yellow flash of native gold filled Britton's startled eyes.

[image]

"From the Indian's extended palm the yellow flash of native gold filled Britton's startled eyes."

CHAPTER XIII.

"Gold! Gold! Gold!" screamed the excitable and drunken Corsican, as he danced about the tent.

At the bright gleam of the yellow metal, Rex had sprung forward and grasped the precious specimen from the Thron-Diuck's hand.

"Where did you get this?" he demanded, breathlessly.

A look of cunning overspread the Indian's coppery features, and discolored teeth were displayed in his gaping grin.

"Give fire-water," he said, fawningly, "then me tell."

Britton examined the piece of ore from every angle in the candle-light and recognized a wonderful sample of alluvial gold. It weighed probably eight ounces, and Rex trembled in excitement not to be repressed. There was no doubt of its origin, and he knew that the carousing rascal must be speaking the truth. The glacier-worn edges of the specimen told that it had come from a heavy deposit, a place of "big gold."

"Where did you get this?" Rex hoarsely repeated, his hands shaking as if weighted down with golden pounds instead of ounces.

"Bring whiskey, then me tell where heap much gold come from," was the Indian's laconic response.

"No, you won't," said Britton. "You'll tell first, and then you may have the fire-water."

He dived into a small kitty-bag wherein he kept some few medicinal mixtures, whipped out the solitary flask, which he was accustomed to carry against a possible dire emergency of the rigorous trails, and held it enticingly before the candle flame.

The liquor sparkled in the light, and the poor red wretch smacked his lips and clawed at it. Rex held him off.

"Afterwards–afterwards," he said with decision.

"Ha!" exclaimed the tantalized Indian, "go heap long way up the White River–"

"The Klondike?" interrupted Rex.

"Yes, as you call, Mis'r," answered the Thron-Diuck, gesticulating frantically with lean, bony fingers like talons. "Go heap way up Klondike; find ice-hills with much frozen springs; there big gold where him be!" His claws pointed at the sample in Britton's fist.

"You mean the headwaters of the Klondike–its source?" questioned Rex, earnestly. "You're sure of that? For heaven's sake don't make any mistake!"

The Indian shook his whole body and stamped in anger.

"Me no mistake," he declared. "Me no lie. Go heap way up where you say, Mis'r, to–to–"

"To the headwaters," prompted Britton.

"Yes, to big chief waters! There five hills like heap big beaver houses all by one dam. White River run through. There place of heap big gold!"

Rex wiped the beads of perspiration from his forehead.

"This is the way I understand you," he said. "Listen and tell me if I'm right! The place lies straight up the Klondike at its headwaters, right in the middle of

five beaver-house hills which the stream cuts through. Is that correct?"

"Right, heap right," replied the Thron-Diuck, overjoyed at being properly understood. He reached for the whiskey again, but Britton was not yet done.

"Wait till I draw a sketch," he said quickly, "and you shall mark these hills in the exact spot."

Rex found his map of the Klondike River in his breast pocket and drew the stream on a larger scale upon a sheet from a notebook. At the river's mouth was a deserted Indian village, lately occupied by Thron-Diucks who had moved back into the fastnesses of the snowy mountains, and no other trace of habitation marked the frozen waterway, which lost itself in bleak heights away to the north, unexplored except by Indians and a few venturesome white trappers.

"Now," said Britton, when he had outlined the sketch, "show me exactly where these hills stand from the source or headwaters of the river."

The Indian touched his talons to the drawing just below a group of low mountains, named on the map the Klondike Hills.

"How far below?" Rex questioned very earnestly.

"Half day, as you call, Mis'r," the Thron-Diuck answered. "Half day with heap good dogs!"

"So?" cried Britton, warming to the scent of the treasure. "How many hills on this side of the stream?"

The Indian located three with as many dabs of his skinny forefinger and showed where the other two hills lay across the river. Rex marked them with small circles, mentally calculating by the scale their distance from the source and thus knowing their position at least approximately.

The Thron-Diuck regarded his handiwork with satisfaction.

"Heap right," he said triumphantly, "Mis'r heap smart man! Give fire-water, Mis'r; you got much big gold!"

Rex passed over the flask without further parley.

"Yes, it's yours," was his final word, "but heaven help you if you have deceived me as to the position of this stuff!"

Lessari lurched forward to share the Indian's draught, but Britton pushed him rudely back upon his bed.

"You go right to sleep," he ordered, "and get fit for the trail in the morning."

Rex sat beside him to enforce the obeyance of the order till the Corsican dropped into slumber, while over beside the camp stove the Thron-Diuck lay in stupefaction.

The thermometer registered forty-eight below when Britton and Lessari mushed out of the North Samson valley at sunrise. The Indian, now partly sobered and conscious that he had sold a well-guarded secret of his tribe, promptly proceeded to efface himself despite the inducements Britton offered him to act in the

capacity of guide, so that the two travelled alone.

As they advanced upon the lonely trail which snaked northward to where the Klondike's source was somewhere hidden in unknown hills, the atmosphere grew keener with intense cold. A merciless, cutting frost fell in fine showers till the two men were covered with a hoary coating which scintillated like glaring tinsel. The icy powder stopped their ears and choked their nostrils, chilling every breath they took.

Lessari unfitted by his natural temperament for such a climate as the Yukon, had always found his respiration labored in winter, and, since he had contracted a severe cold from his soaking in Lake Bennett, his plight was now worse than ever.

Owing to the pressure on his chest he was forced to breathe through the open mouth. Britton pleaded with him not to do this, but the finer fibred Corsican could not endure the strain on his nasal passages and relapsed into breathing between parted lips. As a result, he soon chilled his lungs and began to cough with a dry, hacking sound which Rex heard with foreboding dread.

The mercury dropped lower with every mile they mushed. Icicles formed on their eyebrows, noses and chins, while thin films of ice encased their cheeks, prohibiting any speech.

A thickness of hoar-frost decorated the loaded sled, and the hairy backs of the five dogs were white with it. At intervals they shook themselves roughly in the harness, sending ice particles flying in all directions.

Mingled with this rattle and the grinding song of the sleigh was the leader's "gruff! gruff!" as he blew the congealed snow from his nose.

Camp was made at noon outside an immense ravine which Rex knew by hearsay to be the great cañon of the Klondike. After an hour's rest and a good meal they entered it, finding a precipitous-sided gorge of stupendous size and beauty.

The gigantic gray walls, seamed and full of wide cracks, sloped upward, forming an almost complete arch overhead that admitted a dull glow of light to mingle with the white sheen of the ice below. Great icicles hung by thousands from the rock-crevices, while eternal drippings through the cavern-like roof had formed immense ice columns resembling unsmoothed marble pillars.

The scene before Britton and Lessari looked like a weird, uncanny ice forest full of frozen trunks and clammy, oozy nooks where underworld spirits and grotesque goblins might be expected to reside. The hollow booming of the mighty river, straining in its imprisonment, filled the whole place with a resounding roar, and the force of the fettered torrent shook the coated cave walls till the icicles fell and scattered their rainbow hues upon the floor.

Rex thought this cañon was the most potent symbol of a potent land that

could be imagined. It impressed him vividly with the awesome magnitude, the salient ruggedness, the terrible power of the country of which it was an emblem.

His dog-train swayed with shrieking runners among the massed ice-pillars and emerged from the gorge into a wider valley where the hills rose naturally bright in the sunshine with the welcome blue sky resting upon their peaks.

Britton could see that the Klondike River was the main recipient of the long trains of ice which slid with snail-like motion from the crests of the glaciers. Frozen gullies full of these moving, mile-long torrents broke in upon the larger river and piled the junction points full of massive, chaotic ice-bridges which were painfully difficult to cross.

Lessari stumbled upon one huge jam and went down among the sharp, crystal fragments. He gasped when he regained his feet, and the dry, hacking cough became more convulsive. Seeing that he was nearly spent, Rex beckoned for a few minutes' halt, though having hopes of reaching mountainous shelter before nightfall, he did not wish to delay very long.

While they rested on a high ice-bridge quite a distance above the Klondike Cañon, they heard a thin, hissing wail far back in its depths.

"Sled!" exclaimed the listening Corsican, breaking into speech without thinking of the consequence.

At his effort the icy casing which covered his cheeks snapped in showering splinters, gashing the skin in a dozen places. He groaned in pain while the blood trickled down his face.

Britton thawed his mouth free by the warm pressure of his fur gauntlets.

"You're right, Lessari," he said. "It sounds like a dog-train coming through the cañon. Surely that cursed Indian hasn't been spreading the news! Or perhaps someone has trailed us from Samson because they think we know of a find up this way."

Britton's tone was angry as well as disappointed. He had not undertaken the dangerous and arduous trip up the Klondike for the purpose of showing the way to some trailers who might contest the ground with him. If any rough characters were following because they suspected he had knowledge of a gold deposit, Rex knew he would have to fight for what he found, and fight, no doubt, with the odds against him.

"We'll wait and see who is tracking us," he grimly observed to Lessari.

The whining sound of a dog-train continued, borne through the cold void with clear persistence. Rex strained his eyes on the distant mouth of the cañon to mark who came out, but he watched in vain. The noise ceased as suddenly as it arose, and though they dallied another fifteen minutes, nothing could be seen.

"That's odd," commented Britton. "Wasn't it a dog-sled, Lessari?"

"Sound like him much!" answered the Corsican, in an awed voice. He was

somewhat superstitious, and he nursed his cut face apprehensively, as if it were responsible for the strange incident.

"I could have sworn to that as the shriek of runners," Rex declared, "but it may have been ice. In any event we can't stop longer. Ho! there–mush, mush!"

They forged on, climbing to a still higher altitude and meeting with a frigid air that reached to the very marrow of their bones. Lessari weakened, and Britton made him take to the sled for the rest of the afternoon while he himself continued his heart-breaking tramp beside the dogs, surmounting all obstacles, no matter how formidable, with that intrepid grit and unbroken muscle-strength which was his heritage.

The short, sub-Arctic day closed in swiftly, shrouding everything with a heavy fog, and night caught the two travellers among the black river boulders.

It was a desolate place of incomparable bleakness in which they were forced to camp, but when the stove was set going inside the pitched tent and they had infused some heat into their frost-tried bodies, the outlook seemed more cheerful.

The next day saw a repetition of their hardships and trials. Lessari declared himself strong enough to keep his feet, but Britton forced him to ride behind the dogs. The Corsican lay wrapped in robes, and the spasms of coughing that wrenched his frame told about how fit he was to travel the trail afoot. There were places so rough and so hard to scale that he could not stay upon the loaded sled while the dogs dragged it over. At such points he was compelled to walk, and Rex had to assist him.

They had penetrated into the timbered regions which flanked the Klondike, and the way grew wilder although there was some solace of shelter. According to Britton's estimate of the Thron-Diuck's directions the place of the five mountains could not be many miles distant, and, even in that soul-chilling waste, his blood warmed every inch of his body when he thought success might soon reward his strenuous stampedes.

With the reaching of the forested stretches, grizzly tracks were seen in profusion, indicating that these hungry prowlers were finding the severe weather very hard, for they had covered vast distances in search of food.

As they traversed mile after mile, making rapid progress without hindrance of blistered ice, Britton began to think that his hopes of camping that night among the five beaver-house hills would be realized. Every time they rested for a moment to give the dogs a breathing spell, he eagerly scanned the sketch which he had made. From the contour of the river and the position of the mountains he tried to judge exactly how far he had advanced. Each scrutiny, thus indulged in, gave fresh hope and assurance, and he would dash on with greater speed than was generally attained on the Fields.

The steep granite headlands gave place to more sloping bluffs, and when

Britton's dog-train swept round the river's curve past the first long belt of pine forest, there loomed at a probable distance of six miles the tops of five hills set in a circle.

"It's the place," he shouted joyfully. "By heaven, it's the place–Lessari!"

But Lessari, his endurance worn out by the continual jolting, had rolled from the sled in a dead faint. He could not be revived easily, so Britton had to pitch the tent, light a fire, and attend to him.

The Corsican came to, weak and trembling, and when Rex had given some nourishment, Lessari looked at him with dazed, troubled eyes.

"I am much sorrow," he said confusedly. "Your journey I spoil! Put me on the sled, and it somehow we can reach."

Britton felt a twinge of conscience for a selfish wish as he heard these words from a man who was courageous to the core though obviously unable to continue.

"No," he gravely replied, "you haven't spoiled the journey. We can well rest here and go on to-morrow. Make your mind easy, Lessari!"

The Corsican, still lamenting the check to their advance, fell into an exhausted sleep, while Britton, the selfish desire recurring involuntarily within him, chafed silently as he watched from a distance the peaks of his far-sought gold Mecca.

CHAPTER XIV.

Five dead dogs, their stark bodies clearly outlined on the snow by a sparkling aurora, met Britton's startled gaze when he stumbled sleepily out of the cramped quarters of the tent. A cry of something like despair escaped him as he ran to examine them, turning the gaunt carcasses over and over.

Lessari heard the shout of perturbation and shuffled forth from under the flaps.

"What wrong have you?" he asked anxiously.

Rex stood aside and showed the corpses of their faithful animals.

"They're killed," he said briefly, "and you know what that means for us!"

White horror grew in the Corsican's brown face till it was blanched to a sickly hue. He fully realized that the loss of the dog-team had buried them alive in a frozen wilderness whose relentless cruelty would slowly crush their lives. In a dazed way, he fingered the bodies.

"Not any marks–not any marks," was his vacant observation.

"No," agreed Britton, who controlled himself with difficulty, "they have been neither knifed nor shot, yet some man's hand has done it. Gaucho and the rest of the huskies appeared as well last night as they ever did. No, Lessari, it wasn't an epidemic or even the bitter frost."

"How they are killed, then?" the Corsican inquired petulantly.

"That's the mystery," Rex woefully ruminated, aloud. "I wonder if that snake of a Thron-Diuck followed us and perpetrated this deed! You remember we heard what we thought was a dog-train coming behind us through the Klondike Cañon?"

"Ah! yes," responded his companion, "that I recall–curse him!" Lessari's eyes were vindictive and full of a strange wildness as he stared at Britton.

"Of course that is only a supposition," said Rex, judicially, "but I know how jealous the Indian tribes are of gold-laden creeks. The Thron-Diucks know a good many secrets, but they will not divulge them, and fearing the wrath of his fellows if we located on this deposit, the red wretch may have repented his bargain and taken steps to prevent our profiting by it."

"Look for tracks!" exclaimed the Corsican, on sudden inspiration, but Britton shook his head.

"No use," he lamented, pointing to the pine-banked curve of the river, shining like glass, "the ice is too clean!"

"Curse him! Curse him!" exploded Lessari, again, growing more violent of speech.

"There's no use in cursing, either," Britton said seriously. "We're facing death, Lessari, but we must keep alive as long as possible. We have a tent and some food, and we'll make a strong fight."

The Corsican studied his dubious expression. "Go back?" he asked.

"It can't be done," said Rex. "Our provisions will not last half the time required to make the journey on foot, and there is nothing to shoot over those barren stretches."

"Go on where gold is, then?" Lessari inquired dismally.

"Yes," Britton answered, "our path lies over those five hills. We have only two chances, Lessari, and they are mighty slim! There is the chance of stumbling on the encampment of these Thron-Diuck Indians–they have retired somewhere in these mountains–and the possibility of finding game in the pine forests. The way lies yonder, and, if we find gold there, we'll stake it in case a miracle should bring us out of this trap."

Rex stirred the nose of his dead leader with the toe of his shoepack as he finished speaking, and Lessari saw him bend quickly.

"See that!" Britton exclaimed in quivering anger. He held out something between his fingers, and the Corsican recognized a piece of frozen whitefish covered

with reddish powder.

"Poisoned!" he ejaculated with renewed horror.

"Yes, someone has fed them poisoned whitefish," said Rex, vehemently. "Gaucho had this in his teeth!"

Lessari broke out in a flood of denunciation. Britton quelled his own indignation and began untying the tent-ropes.

They thawed their canvas shelter from the banked ice and snow by means of several brush fires and loaded the sled. Any articles which could be dispensed with and which unnecessarily impeded them were cast away. The outfit was reduced to a minimum, and Rex packed all the remaining provisions carefully in one large sack. He preserved, too, the food intended for the dogs, for he thought they might easily find themselves in such straits as to be glad of it.

When all was securely lashed on the heavy Yukon sleigh, the two men harnessed themselves in the traces and started laboriously toward the circle of hills six miles away. For Lessari, they were six long and excruciating miles. He was weak and unfit, and though Britton took the heavier portion of the toil, the tramp told rapidly on his companion.

The river curved with such a sweep that they struck overland to shorten the distance. They bridged wide gullies full of blistered ice and swerved erratically with the loaded sled among rugged rocks and slippery hummocks that barred their path. Lessari continued to mutter and complain during the whole six miles, his mumblings toward the end becoming somewhat incoherent.

When they slipped down a long ravine which opened on the river right in the middle of the circling hills, the Corsican was staggering along with protruding tongue.

"You're fagged!" Rex exclaimed, noticing his plight. "Better rest here a minute!"

Lessari's answer was a vicious pull on the sleigh rope that nearly took Britton off his feet. They moved on because the Corsican would accept no delay, and Rex saw that the other's motive power was a sort of delirium which instilled unlimited feverish energy.

The pair of toilers emerged at last from the black rift and climbed an ice-capped ridge which fell like a sloping watershed in a southward direction. Around them the five beaver-house mountains rose strangely dome-like, the great river apparently losing itself in the bowels of the thousand ice chasms which furrowed the base of the valley-beds.

"This is the Klondike's source," Rex murmured as he contemplated the scene, "and it looks cold enough to kill you."

"Yes," sighed Lessari, "you have it right. But the gold–the gold is warm. Here I feel it!" He put his hand to his breast, and smiled contentedly.

"It's all that's keeping you warm," Rex gruffly commented. The observation quickly altered Lessari's expression, and he glared with a wild impenetrable look as they proceeded to skirt the fringing line of gravelled granite which was the shore of the now glacier-like stream.

Here the detached ice lay scattered about in huge blocks, an impediment to their feet, where it had glided with the shining rubble from the farther plateaus. In the shallow cup that the five hills formed, they met with a long, treacherous crevasse whose yawning depth of three hundred feet effectually cut off any further progress in a direct line. The great abyss seemed to possess a fascination for Lessari, and he trod dangerously near the edge to peer over.

"Don't do that!" Britton sharply cautioned, pulling him back. "A slip of your moccasin would put you at the bottom. We'll have to leave the sled here and see if there is any way round!"

The immense crevasse dipped from an overhanging glacier on one of the five mountains and slanted across the granite ridge they had been skirting. The two men left the Yukon sleigh standing, blocked, above the deep split and followed along the edge, searching for a place to cross. The slant of the ravine became more, acute, and, where the sides were jagged and shelved, they clambered down lower and lower till the whole formation suddenly broke upon a vast cavern that nosed into the river-bed and opened on the other side where the way was passable though extremely hard.

"It's rough going, but we must get across," Rex said, turning round to Lessari.

The latter was handling some rusty-looking pebbles which he had kicked out of the black cavern floorway.

"Ironstone!" he grunted scornfully, gazing at the cave side where similar fragments with glacier-worn edges stuck out.

"Let me see," cried Britton, hastily jumping forward. Lessari dropped the stones in his hand, and Britton's heart leaped at the weight of them.

"Ironstone!" he exclaimed, his voice all trembling. "My God, Lessari, it's gold!"

"Santa Virgin!" the Corsican screamed–"Gold!" He snatched frantically at the precious pebbles, chattering madly.

"I'm positive it is," Rex said excitedly, "but the flame-test will soon tell."

He produced a bit of candle from his coat and lit it with unsteady fingers. While Lessari held the specimens, he applied the flame to them. The heat singed the Corsican's hands, but he did not seem to feel any pain. Presently the rusty red covering of the pebbles disappeared as fine dust in the blaze, and Lessari gripped pure alluvial gold.

"Santa Virgin!" he screamed again. "We're rich! We're rich!"

Rex was off immediately, running about the cavern walls, making a hasty

survey with his candle end. The walls, like the floor, were studded here and there with peeping corners of the precious ore for which he had endured two thousand miles of pitiless Yukon trails. Unbounded wealth lay within his grasp, and, with the triumph of the moment, he forgot that he was a millionaire in a death-trap.

"Go up for a spade, Lessari," he cried. "It is a mighty deposit–'big gold,' as the Thron-Diuck said."

The Corsican started up as a faint, rushing noise sounded above, like ice sliding upon ice.

"What's that?" asked Britton anxiously.

They listened, but heard no further echo. Rex appeared ill at ease.

"We're among glaciers, Lessari," he said, "and we must be careful. An avalanche might easily bury us in a hole like this. Get that shovel quickly!"

Lessari climbed up the lip of the ravine and disappeared, while Britton pottered about, speculating, as well as exulting, over the magnificent find. It was a showing that gave promise of surpassing such far-famed creeks as the Eldorado and Bonanza, and Rex gloated over his prospects. Standing in that deep cavern under the Klondike's bed, his thoughts went back to the green Sussex lands, Hyde Park in the London season, and the foaming Channel swells under the *Mottisfont's* bows. He thought of the estates this buried gold would buy, the power it would bring, the restoration to public favor it would effect, and he laughed mirthlessly at the idea of purchasing his way into quarters of society and diplomacy which had closed their doors to him after his Algerian escapade.

A shrill cry from Lessari above interrupted his cogitations. He scrambled out of the cavern and clawed his way up the slippery side of the rift.

The Corsican was staring down into the abyss where they had left the sled. On his face there rested a look of terrified bewilderment, and he pointed into the gloomy depths.

"Gone!" he wailed–"gone down!"

Britton looked around for the sleigh, but it had vanished. A sharp fear assailed him as he dashed to Lessari's side and saw the mark of the runners on the powdered edge of the ravine where the laden sled had taken the leap.

"That's what we heard slide," Rex groaned, "and it has all our food!"

He went mechanically to the exact spot where the Yukon sleigh had stood. There lay the piece of granite which had blocked the runners, with the print of a husky's foot-pad in a minute snow-pocket at its side. Rex showed it to the Corsican, a swift, ominous wrath mantling his countenance.

"By heaven, Lessari, this is too much!" he cried. "It has been done purposely like–like the poison! There's a hand in the dark somewhere, and it means murder!"

The Corsican's harrowed senses appeared incapable of comprehending the statement.

"Starving–and rich!" he muttered wildly. "Rich–and starving!" He walked without fear to the brink of the chasm and began to lower himself over the rock with his hands.

"Here!" Rex roared in terror, rushing up. "What do you mean?"

"Stay back!" snarled the Corsican. "I go down to eat."

"The gold has turned your head!" Britton exclaimed. "You couldn't get down there for all the food on earth. Why, man, it's three hundred feet!" He sprang with a lithe movement and dragged the Corsican from his perilous position.

Lessari gave an inhuman cry and closed with Britton. Rex saw his eyes as they struggled and knew, with a feeling of chill horror, that they were the eyes of a madman.

"Ha!" gasped the demented fellow. "This time you go!"

He strove to throw Britton into the gulf, for resistance had resulted in giving his mania a different trend. The delirium gave him the strength of six men, and Rex found himself being gradually pushed into the crevasse. He strained and tugged with all the mighty power of his shoulders and corded arms, but it was of no avail against the frenzied Lessari. He tried another tack!

"Cool yourself, Lessari," he said soothingly, "and we'll get this sled." They could never get it, but he hoped the artifice might serve! Even that attempt at reason proved useless, for the Corsican redoubled his efforts. The eternal cold, his illness, the death of the dogs, the fever of the gold-finding, and the loss of their provisions had all combined to drive him mad.

"Devil!" he screamed, "you threw the food down!" And Rex knew he was indeed demented.

Fighting every inch of the way, Britton was forced toward the abyss. Three feet from it, he felt the necessity for desperate action. Watching his opportunity, he tripped Lessari on the iced rock, and they both fell heavily. Rex wound his arms about the Corsican, putting forth the last ounce of strength; that grip of steel would have held a giant, but it could not hold a madman. Lessari tore himself free and gained the uppermost position, with hands on Britton's throat.

Rex gazed into the rolling eyes, the wild, distorted visage of the Corsican, and felt himself shoved to the very brink of the crevasse. He wrenched violently at Lessari's wrists and arms, but they were as iron rods, and the movement brought his head out over the rim of the rock.

In one fleeting vision he saw the white, rising ice-fields cutting into the blue sky, with glacier-capped peaks banking up behind; he saw three of the five circling hills, their frozen gorges shining emerald in the sun; then, as Lessari's wolfish face came closer to his own and his arms were pressed down, the fingers felt the revolver butt in his belt.

In sheer despair he grasped it as a drowning man snatches at an oar. Its

report cracked out and rattled in a hundred blatant echoes down the gorge. Lessari uttered a gasping groan and lurched to one side, his fingers lax and weak.

Britton wormed his shoulders back from the edge of the abyss, shifting the Corsican's weight with his legs, and arose in safety. His lungs were heaving with the tremendous strain like those of a spent Channel-swimmer, and the cords of his throat were taut.

When he turned over the limp form at his feet, he looked into Lessari's dead face.

CHAPTER XV.

Back in Dawson, on the evening of the same day when Britton stood alone with the awful Klondike solitude at the edge of Five Mountain Gulch–as it came to be named afterwards–when he faced at once the icy phantom Cold, the grisly skeleton Starvation, and the devil-faced thing Remorse, when he halted with death at his feet and its dread power pervading the desolate snows about him, there occurred, in the golden city, a strikingly different scene, a scene palpitating with warmth and life.

A group of men, present at Grant Simpson's invitation, occupied one of the ground-floor rooms of the Half Moon restaurant, engaged ostensibly in doing justice to a very elegant and costly supper, but really killing time in a luxurious way and waiting anxiously for the bell-note of business which they knew their host intended to ring in on them.

Simpson, with his accustomed lavish expenditure, had engaged the room to the utter exclusion of other guests who might have dined at two of the three tables which the chamber held; he had ordered that the trio of tables be lined up and converted into one long feasting board which could be covered with fine viands and drinks–principally drinks! The catering was let to the hostess of the Half Moon, Aline Giraud, who was a genius of management, all the more so since Pierre's absence on the trails left every responsibility in her hands. That night she expected him back from the completion of his baggage-freighting contract with Laverdale, the big American mine-owner who was bound for Dyea and the States, and Aline wished to have everything right. She wished the supper that this well-dressed, money-burning lawyer was giving to be a thing beyond criticism, and her every effort was devoted to making it so.

And the bill! She told herself the bill would be the best of it all. It would be a thing to cheer Pierre's heart and cause him to dance, with his cap thrown among the ceiling festoons.

Simpson's was the dominating figure of the company present in the room of the Half Moon where Aline Giraud served so assiduously with her alert, graceful movements and her full, white arms. He seemed to hold the key to some enterprise which claimed the attention of all under their masks of good fellowship, but Simpson did not yet consider the moment propitious for the unfolding of hidden plans.

He sat at the head of his table, with his guests ranged in two lines on either side, men well known in Dawson, the chief characteristic of whom was money. That was why they were present! If they had not had money to invest, they could have entered into no proposition with Simpson.

Jarmand, the fat, wealthy broker with the currant-roll neck and the oily insolence, was there; Fripps, the sour, thin, anæmic promoter, maintained his usual unobtrusive but nevertheless certain presence; a trio of capitalists of a somewhat similar stamp, keen-visaged but rotund-bodied, quelled their impatience successfully, while they secretly chafed at Simpson's dalliance, and awaited his proposition. These men were inseparable in any business prospect; they worked together, invested together, and stood or fell by a triumvirate judgment; and since their names began with the same letter–Cranwell, Crowdon, and Carr–they had been dubbed the three C's.

Where the three C's went in, the financial project need not be strictly legitimate. They had few scruples or qualms, and when they took hold of a mining scheme or a real estate deal, wise men kept out.

There were others present, probably a dozen in all, and among them Jim Laurance, who had come with a great deal of misgiving and scepticism on receipt of a letter from Simpson advising him of an opportunity of getting in on the ground floor right under the scoops of a dredging proposition.

And in preparation for his demonstration of ideas and plans, Grant Simpson bade them all enjoy themselves, setting the example himself with a free hand on the ladle of the punch bowl. Many followed his example from appetite; the three C's imitated, thinking of a relished business dessert as a sort of solace.

Famine might be threatening in the land of gold, but she had certainly no embargo on liquors and cigars. Both were indulged in without stint.

Blue, acrid wreaths of smoke filled the room, and the atmosphere became very warm. No one would have guessed it was forty below in the street, The two lines of guests at the table and the host at its head emptied glasses and refilled, tossed them off and ladled up again. Small talk hummed, and jests cracked out, more or less coarse in the intervals when pretty Aline Giraud was absent from

the room during the different courses of the meal.

Jim Laurance, the only temperate one in the company, sipped his simple glass of punch sparingly, refusing the bottled stuff and the heavy wines. He felt disgusted and sorry that he had come, but he had money to invest if Simpson's thing suited him, and he settled himself to sit out the revel.

The roadhouse at Indian River had proved a good thing for Laurance. He had struck his Klondike right on that creek, and he was sane enough to know it. Instead of frittering away his coin on fool stampedes in hopes of a mighty strike, he was satisfied to invest it in sound mining securities and watch the dividends slowly grow. Such an enterprise, he hoped, was in Simpson's mind.

Simpson's wine, however, was more in Simpson's thoughts than the enterprise. He had unwisely glutted his taste for beverages with a tang, and he lost control of his manners as well as his senses, laughing boisterously and telling unsavory tales.

"Hi, there!" he would yell, skidding the empty punch-bowl down the table to Jarmand. "Fill her up, Fatty. You're the doctor. Put in something stiff–stiff enough to make your moustache stand! Something d–d stiff, Fatty!"

"That's it, Jarmand," gurgled Bonneaves, a young profligate and an especial chum of Simpson's. "Mix us a regular old hair-raiser. We're out for fun! Who's holding us down?"

"No one! No one!" shouted three or four of the muddled men, stamping on the floor and breaking into confused singing, which set up rumbling echoes through the other parts of the restaurant and went far to disturbing its customers.

"Tell us a story, Simp," said Jarmand. "Old Simp's the boy for spicy ones. Eh, men? You bet your liver-colored notes he is. Rip one off, Simp, there's a good fellow!"

Accordingly Simp ripped one off, a story that convulsed the drinkers but which made Laurance's blood boil. The one-time plainsman, now an Alaskan sourdough, sat very still, without the shadow of a smile upon his face.

Aline Giraud, accompanied by a waitress, an ugly, angular Danish woman, brought in the meats. These were bear steaks, slices of moose flank, and grouse in pairs, a veritable feast which would have fed a hundred poverty-pinched wretches in the outlying camps. The thought came to Laurance as he poised his knife and fork over the breast of a fat grouse dressed with sage dressing in a wonderful brown gravy.

"Seems hard to waste this here," he said simply, "when there's so many poor cusses starvin' round the Fields."

"To h–l with them!" cried Simpson, roughly. "What we have, we got. Eh? We pay for it, and when you pay your way, the rest can go and be d–d to 'em. How's that?"

"Right," nodded Bonneaves. "You're always right, Simp. You're a wise old buck. Glad I've known you. You can show a fellow things. Here's to you, Simp!"

The talk grew louder and looser. As the gravies were being served, Simpson and Jarmand, exchanging winks, attempted a double surprise. The lawyer made a bungling effort to kiss Aline Giraud on the cheek, while at the same time the fat broker leaned forward and pecked at the waitress. The result was a startling surprise for Jarmand. The ham-like hand of the Danish woman descended with a resounding smack on the currant-roll neck of the broker.

The seated company roared at Jarmand. Jim Laurance frowned at Simpson and half rose from his chair, but Aline had succeeded in eluding the lawyer and fled through the doorway, the angry red showing in her cheeks.

"That's one on you, Fatty," tittered his friends. "Beautiful throw-down, that! Right place, too! Like another, Fatty? Better try again. Ho! ho!"

"Cheer up, old man," laughed Simpson, accepting the joke. "Better luck next time. Walk into the punch there, Fatty; you have a weak heart."

They walked into the punch till the third bowl failed to withstand the charges, and a fourth had to be mixed. Some of the men, unable to restrain their vivacity, arose and capered about the laden table, singing and playing the fool perfectly, and stopping only to refill empty tumblers.

The Danish waitress, now secure in the triumph of her first quick victory, held her ground undaunted, completing the serving of the banquet in spite of the noise. Aline, no longer entering the room, watched the progress of things through the doorway from the farther chamber. Somehow, this fine supper over which she had spent so much effort had not turned out as she had contemplated; things were getting beyond her grasp; her eyes grew anxious wide, and startled.

After all, she thought, it might not please Pierre. Even the bill would never compensate for the disgusting clamor and the humiliation.

Laurance had finished his single glass of punch and was drawing on his short, black pipe. He disdained the long, fat cigars of Jarmand and the three C's, and cursed the ill-smelling, coronet-banded cigarettes of Simpson and Bonneaves. The oddest figure in the group himself, he felt nothing but contempt for the others. The only thing about them he respected was the business instinct of their sober moments, and there seemed but little chance for a display of that now.

The Alaskan waited till the fourth bowl of punch ran low, hoping that Simpson would open his mouth to speak sound sense, instead of salacious nonsense, and tell them why he had invited them to supper, but when the concoction of a fifth bowl was begun, amid most uproarious hilarity, Laurance inwardly fumed, making up his mind that he would not sit there much longer.

Unconsciously, he was frowning through the drifting haze of smoke at his companions. There was no stern decorum present, nor any nicety of attire. To be

sure, Simpson, as host, and Bonneaves, to imitate his model, wore dinner clothes, but the rest were dressed in the ordinary dress which occupation demanded. The three C's were in black broadcloth; Jarmand sported a suit of loud check pattern; Fripps favored grey, as wrinkled and faded as his skin. The others of the company were mostly mining men who had come in corduroys, with trousers stuffed in knee-high cruisers, and had hung fur coats and caps on the pegs behind their chairs. Laurance, travelling by dog-train to Dawson, wore the musher's outfit of the trails.

He looked rough and uncouth, but very much a man. His beard was disreputable as ever; the iron-gray hair stood up stiffer and stubbier, allowing his rat ears to be seen; his nose peeped out, cherry-red and snub. He was lowering on the foolish antics of the rest of the men, and his keen blue eyes were narrowed so much that they did not flash.

"What's the matter with you, Laurance, old sport?" cried Bonneaves, joyously. "Look as if you'd buried your best friend in the punch-bowl!"

"Why," shouted Simpson, "if that's so, we'll resurrect him! Resurrect's the word, boys. Eh? How's that?" He seized the bowl in both arms and emptied it to the last drop in the array of glasses. Then he turned the dish upside down on the table and hammered upon its bottom, while the company roared as if he had done some extremely witty thing.

"What say, Laurance?" asked young Bonneaves. "Feel any better?"

"I feel like twistin' your cussed neck, young man," answered Laurance, wrathfully. "What did I come here for? To eat a decent meal an' talk business! I didn't come to swill meself–I'm certainly certain of that! We're men anyhow, an' there's no call for us to act like a lot of calf youngsters as can't pull the draw-string on their gullets. I say we're here to talk business!"

"H–l, yes," grunted Bonneaves, with the air of sudden recollection. "You're right, sport, now I come to remember. Simp did bring us here for a purpose, and that's no lie. Give us your scheme, Simp. Hot and heavy and fast–that's the way!"

Because their tastes palled a little, the others added their clamorous entreaties. Their exhortations made a confused babel:

"Hit it up, Simp! Uncork your oracle. Spread yourself quick, old boy. What's the tune now? Time we talked, by gad!" And Bonneaves nodded sagely at Laurance, muttering: "You're all right, sport. Simp's a wise buck, but you're a wiser! See? Attention, you duffers!" He secured order by pounding the board with the thick bottom of his tumbler.

"Simp's going to spout," he announced authoritatively. Noticing that the lawyer had engrossed himself with the opening of a champagne bottle, Bonneaves hastily added: "Why, no! Rat me if he isn't going to swallow! Here, Simp, that won't do. Put it away. Can't you see your friends are waiting?"

"I'm busy," protested Simpson, struggling with the cork. "It's all about that Yukon dredging business anyhow. I've taken it off Morris's hands since he's played the fool and disappeared, d–n him! I need backing. That's what I need. I can't go it alone!"

"What's the lay-out?" prompted Jarmand. "Put aside the bottle and get down to business."

Simpson flung away the opener as a useless thing and grasped a fresh one.

"Curse the bottle and curse the business," he fumed. "I'm busy, I tell you. Here, I have the prospectus. Read it yourselves, and you'll save my wind!" He drew some typewritten sheets from his breast-pocket and flung them upon the cloth.

What he had called the prospectus passed down the line at one side of the table, up again, and down the other side, greeted with grunts of approval by those still clear-brained enough to understand and with much head-wagging from such as were incapable of comprehension.

"Bully!"

"Standard bred!"

"Up to snuff!"

"Neat as garters!"

These were some of the comments from the appreciative assembly.

Last of all, the prospectus came to Jim Laurance. At the top of the sheet, in large typing, was the name, "Yukon Dredging Company." Underneath that reposed the list of directors, picked, apparently, from the group invited to supper. Jarmand's name appeared, and Fripps's, Bonneaves's, and the names of the three C's.

Laurance quietly read the sheets through, with their significance vitally impressing itself on him, and when he finished, he saw that he held the kind of thing which is circulated by thousands through the mails for the catching of suckers. It was the universally familiar, folded sheet that expounded the virtues of the greatest dredging proposition in the world.

"By gad," he cried, angrily shaking the prospectus in the air, "so this is what you've hauled me over here to back up, eh? A cussed, dirty, widow-an'-orphan robbin' swindle, if you ast me! An', gents, I give it to you straight: you're a pack of low faro dealers, a bunch of thimbleriggers, a handful of flimflammers if you put through that there deal. You're a ring of thieves and d–d blacklegs, gents!"

"Hold on there, sport!" yelled Bonneaves. "You go it too strong. We won't stand for all that."

"I can go lots stronger yet, young cocky-neck," warned Lawrence. "Why, I ain't half goin'. You should see me fizz some time, me son, an' you'd run your feet off for fear of bein' blowed up." He regarded the youthful profligate grimly,

shaking his stubby scalp and gray beard aggressively, but in the corners of his eyes there lurked a humorous expression.

"Aren't you in on this?" asked Jarmand, rolling a wave of his oily insolence down the table to Laurance. "Aren't you taking hold? There's money in it!"

The Alaskan eyed him squarely.

"Not the kind of money I want," he said severely. "Not me own kind, by a thousand yard shot! I don't want no widow's mites or orphan's pennies; I don't steal no wimmen's savin's nor the hard-earned dollars of some poor laborin' cuss as thinks the Yukon is one whoppin' lump of gold an' all we got to do here is to file up our finger-nails and claw it off in pieces. No, sir, count me out! An' I'll see some law-sharp an' have you gents counted out, too. You don't work this here game so easy. I'm certainly certain of that! You can't rob people so d–d bare-faced. No, sir, you truly can't. Why, this here would be wors'n jumpin' all the claims on Samson Creek!"

Laurance's glance rested full on Grant Simpson as he uttered his bold words, and the lawyer looked up with suspicious, drink-steeped eyes.

"What the devil's wrong with this thing?" he demanded angrily. "What puts your back up?"

"Look here," snapped Laurance, pointing to the typewritten sheet. "You claim to have one hundred miles river frontage, or 'bout ten thousand acres, on Indian Creek. You bought it from the Government! Pretty lie, if you ast me! Clear title from them, and all the rest of the high-falutin's! Pah!–it turns me sick. For you haven't a yard–not one d–d yard. I'm there, an' I know!"

The Alaskan's vehemence drew the attention of everyone, drunk or sober.

"An' you have two dredges at work, expectin' a third," he went on, continuing to read from the prospectus. "That's a crackin' good Sunday paper joke. What does it mean?"

"Well," growled Simpson, "we will have. We intend to."

"The devil you do," said Laurance. "You'll put the money in your pocket an' keep it there. To h–l with your prospectus!" He tore the sheets in half and threw the fragments on the floor.

Simpson laughed. He viewed the whole affair with colossal unconcern. In its time he could proceed with the venture at immense gain to himself and the others. It must be postponed, in spite of it being the reason for the assembly, because, just now, wine was a much more important thing.

"You don't have to plunge," he commented. "Stay out if you can't like it."

"Yes, but he doesn't need to give us extra work," interposed Jarmand, expostulating about the torn prospectus.

"Have an ice, Laurance." advised young Bonneaves. "It'll cool you down."

"I'll have nothin'," Laurance growled, reaching for his coat. "I don't hanker

after suppin' with them as I now know is thieves."

At the host's call, the Danish waitress brought in the ices on a tray, while Jim Laurance muffled himself in his coat.

"Where's Aline?" Simpson asked, assuming the privilege of familiarity.

"My mistress?" said the waitress. "She will serve no more. She will not enter."

"But she'll have to," cried Simpson, flushing with anger and obstinacy. "Tell her to run in and serve immediately or I shall come after her and kiss both her cheeks instead of one."

The Danish woman flounced out, and Jarmand involuntarily put his fingers to his fat neck.

"You see," explained Simpson, "it isn't like as if I hadn't paid her for the supper and for occupying her room. And, by the way, this isn't the only room!" He nodded and laughed evilly, adding: "The hubby's on the trails."

Laurance's coat went off his back with a reverse of the motion which was putting it on. The garment flew into one corner, and the owner's voice rang out across the room like the clank of good steel.

"By heaven, Simpson," he roared, "you can't throw one speck of mud on Pierre's wife. You'll eat dirt for it. You're a d–d dago-hearted liar!"

Laurance sprang along behind the row of chairs to reach Simpson at the table's head, but a hand caught his elbow as he passed the side door and whirled him about. With the suddenness of an apparition, he saw Pierre, in musher's dress, fresh from the trails, filling the entrance with his bulk, so that the white face of Aline had to peer under the arm which held Laurance back.

"Dis for me, *camarade*," murmured Pierre, pushing the Alaskan behind him.

Giraud then walked quickly past the astonished men till he stood in front of Simpson. Very deliberately he gazed at him.

"M'sieu'," he said, "you wan coward. You wan dam coward!" And his open palms gave Simpson a stinging blow on either cheek.

The lawyer lashed out with both hands and feet, but Pierre grasped him by the throat and shook him like a long rag. Bedlam broke loose! Chairs and tables were overturned as the half-dazed revellers jumped up. Aline's screams were mingled with the crash of glass and chinaware. Jarmand, Bonneaves, and two or three more of Simpson's friends rushed to his assistance, bent on violence toward Pierre, but Jim Laurance swung on them sharply, with eight inches of blued, cylindrical steel glittering in either hand.

"Back there," he yelled, "every man-jack of you, or I'll plug you with these gas-pipes!"

The glinting light on the dull, ugly Colts daunted them no more than the determined gleam in the eyes of the man behind. The rescuers fell aside like gale-

blown gravel and remained glued to the wall.

Pierre Giraud set the lawyer on his feet. The voyageur's face was pale and rigid.

"M'sieu'," he said, "you lak wan feather in my hand. Ah no be go fight wit' you dat way, 'cause dat not be fair. *Mais* you geeve Aline wan insult–de wors' insult dat man could geeve! An' Aline, she lak wan leetle w'ite saint. M'sieu'," and he tapped Simpson's shoulder, "wan of us be keel here. Ah keel you, fair, or you keel me. Tak' de choice of dose!" He indicated Laurance's pistols.

It was no orthodox duel. There occurred no pacing, no arrangement, no seconding, no counting! Laurance put one weapon in Simpson's hand, whipped the other over to Giraud, and stepped between the door-jambs, screening the thing from Aline.

Abruptly the shooting began, the revolvers spurting jets of flame through the blue haze of the room, whose atmosphere thickened into swirling wreaths with every report.

It was a scene of the wildest disorder, with the overturned tables and chairs and shattered glass below; lights above, swaying to the explosions of the pistols; at the sides the lines of awed yet excited men flattened against the walls; the anxious Laurance and the frantic, white-faced wife in the side entrance; guests fleeing from the other parts of the establishment with shrieks and clamor; and in the centre of it all the two combatants manoeuvring in the mist of smoke to avoid being hit, advancing and firing swiftly as they advanced.

Simpson shot the faster, with wild, deadly, malevolent hatred; Giraud directed his weapon with slower deliberateness, ruled by one earnest, avenging impulse. The room rocked to the deafening reverberations of the pistols; the bullets went pang-panging on the wainscoting; the jets of flame turned to crossed spears stabbing through the smoke.

In ten seconds the men were within gun-reach in the centre of the floor. Simpson's sixth ball broke the skin on his opponent's neck, but Giraud's fifth went hurtling through the lawyer's brain.

Simpson sagged in a little heap of black tuxedo and white starch, his brow stained with spurting red. Aline Giraud was sobbing on Pierre's breast, but Laurance roused him roughly to an acceptance of realities.

"Hit it, an' hit it quick!" Jim urged vociferously. "The Mounted will be here on the run in a minnit. Gad, that firin' must wake up the whole town. Where's the dog-train? Is it unhitched?"

"*Non*," answered Pierre, speaking like a man in a dream, "she be in de yard lak Ah left her."

"Come on, then," whispered Laurance, pulling him out.

Aline clung to him piteously, and Pierre embraced her with a swift, despair-

ing, passionate gesture. Then he put her from him with an effort that was agony.

"He'll come back," consoled Laurance, "as soon as this blows over. Come on, Pierre. I hear runnin'."

They were gone on the instant, leaving Aline Giraud with her sweet, white face upturned in prayer and her hands clasped in an attitude of fear, parting, and renunciation.

When the uniformed men of the Mounted Police filled the room where Simpson lay dead, Pierre was galloping his dog-team at full speed up the ice-trail of the Klondike.

"Hit it for the Thron-Diuck camps," Laurance had advised. "They're somewhere in them mountains. An' lie low till I send you word by an Indian."

That was how Pierre, heading for the Thron-Diuck encampments near the Klondike's source, found Rex Britton four days later, half dead from starvation and exposure, with his last burned match in his pocket, ravings on his tongue and delirium in his brain, about fifteen miles from Five Mountain Gulch.

CHAPTER XVI.

"Sergeant, this is the devil's own country!" exclaimed Cyril Ainsworth, as he stood outside the Mounted Police post at the head of Lake Bennett.

Sergeant Church laughed heartily. It was late spring and just about the worst time for mosquitoes and black-flies.

"Your introduction to the country hasn't been an exactly pleasant one," he replied, "but it is better than the winter."

"I can't see why men will bury themselves here," the lawyer complained, "especially a man like Britton!"

"He struck it rich," Church said. "He's worth two millions. Yes, Britton's one of Dawson's big guns now!"

"That's no reason for remaining coffined," Ainsworth snapped. "Why doesn't he come back to England and live a civilized life? Then we would know where to find him when he is wanted, without crossing an ocean and a continent and traversing a God-forsaken wilderness as big as the motherland!"

A constable of the post came up from the lake.

"The canoe's ready, sir," he reported, with a salute.

Ainsworth and Sergeant Church moved toward the shore. The lawyer had

come in over the summer trail from Dyea, the White Pass Railway from Skagway to Lake Bennett being as yet only a talked-of project, and his many experiences had been not altogether comforting ones.

"It is a pity you cannot wait for the steamer," Church observed. "Canoe travelling is very hard when one is not accustomed to it."

"D–n the steamer!" exploded Ainsworth. "I am told that these boats run weeks behind their schedules. What use is that to a man on urgent business? You inhabit a devil of a country, sir."

Sergeant Church laughed again, wondering silently how Ainsworth's system and precision would avail against the numerous unforeseen contingencies of that broad Northland.

They reached the landing, where a thirty-foot Peterborough waited in care of two brawny Chilcoot men, named Dave and Pete, who had lost the other sections of their respective cognomens, along with their former identities, somewhere in the place of long trails.

The canoe was a roomy one, moderately fast, and fairly light on the portage, a necessity for the Dawson trip. Pete trimmed the packs in it very carefully so as to give fine balance when he should take the stern, with Dave in the bow and their passenger between them.

"We put in the canned stuff an' the fly grease," volunteered Dave, with a sly wink at Sergeant Church.

The sergeant pulled furiously at his moustache to hide a smile, and mumbled some comment on the adverse wind over Lake Bennett.

The grizzled Pete, meanwhile, was scrutinizing Ainsworth's legs with an unappreciative eye. The lawyer had thought that English riding breeches would be a very suitable thing for roughing it on the canoe trip, and had donned a tightly-cut pair, together with the accompanying leggings.

"They'll git down the leggin' an' clean through them pants," Pete sagely observed.

"What?" asked Ainsworth.

"The flies," answered Pete, "they'll make mosquito-nettin' of them leg-o'-muttons. Git some overalls an' cruisers if you don't want to be drilled like a honeycomb."

Ainsworth recognized the wisdom of this advice, even if he resented its criticism, and went back to the post with Church. When he appeared again, he was attired in eighteen-inch cruisers, tough duck overalls, and flannel shirt with vest, to keep the bloodthirsty black-flies from stabbing through.

"You look some Christian-like," commented Pete, in a low tone. Then aloud he added: "You're fit to fight them black divils now! Let's hit her up!"

They did hit it up over Bennett, with Sergeant Church waving them farewell

from the post.

Ainsworth had never been in a canoe, having ridden a ten-ton barge down from Linderman, and the apparent unstability of the craft appalled him, though he took particular pains to conceal his concern. It required considerable effort to preserve an unruffled mien, and Pete noticed that the lawyer's white fingers gripped the gunwale like a vise. Lake Bennett offered a thirty-mile pull, and with every mile the blustering headwind increased till it blew a smothering gale.

"This ain't no tug-boat," Pete growled, at last. "Git out yon extra paddle."

Ainsworth gasped. He had not expected that he would be ordered to help with the locomotion when he was paying his men ten dollars each a day and a bonus if they landed him in Dawson by the date upon which it was necessary for him to be there in Britton's interests. He began to wish he had waited for the steamer, and he made a mild protest to the grizzled stern paddler.

"This isn't in the bargain," he said confidently.

"No, nor this sea ain't in the bargain," returned Pete. "Paddle, durn you! Do you want to git swamped?"

The big, swinging waves drenched them, and Ainsworth fell to work with the extra paddle. They made some headway thus, though the lawyer had to alternately paddle and bail, but the gale grew worse and forced them to creep along the shore.

There the three men fought the squall, wading in the shallow water and pulling and shoving their canoe through the pounding surf. It was Ainsworth's first baptism, and the gods of the north had conspired to make it thorough enough.

That night they camped on Cariboo Crossing amid the black-flies and mosquitoes. These made a specialty of dining upon Ainsworth. He was a tender, fresh cheechako, much more inviting than the leathern-skinned, calloused sourdoughs, Dave and Pete.

While the Chilcoot men pitched the tent, Ainsworth batted the flies. They came in ravenous swarms, bent upon participating in a treat, and Ainsworth wrapped Cariboo Crossing and its environment in a haze of sulphurous expressions. Because he was in shelter where the wind could not reach them, the black pests covered his face and neck; they drifted from the thickets like mist wracks and made the camping hour unbearable for the lawyer.

Presently, however, Pete had the stringing of the tent all finished; had anchored the ends, ballasted the sides, and banked it about with moss to keep out the pests at night. Then, as Dave made a couch of pulled boughs for their passenger, he built a smoky fire.

"Git in that," he said to the lawyer. "It'll fix 'em."

Ainsworth found to his satisfaction that the dense smudge relieved him of his winged assailants. He stood in it so long that Pete, smiling to himself, built

another fire, upon which he cooked bannocks and fried fish caught in the lake.

They ate their evening meal, protected by the smoke, and Ainsworth, lying back with lighted pipe, watching Pete bake flapjacks for the next day, experienced a comfortable, soothing sensation. The long twilight of the Northland died, and the dark marched over Bennett. Upon the clean rock they had picked as a camping place their twin fires shone with a ruddy glow against the dark green of the shrubbery and blocked out their canvas like some giant white moth among the bushes.

Northern insects and lizards sang and crooned in voices strange to Ainsworth; strange noises of the darkness echoed and ceased; the stars wheeled slowly, and the crimson camp blaze faded to amber coals.

"Put your head under the blanket an' keep her there," was Pete's warning, as they turned in.

Ainsworth tried to obey, but decided that the observance of such a decree would result in suffocation. He preferred to endure agony and live, for though the tent had been well prepared, it was impossible to keep out all the mosquitoes.

They sang in falsetto choruses above the sleepers' heads. Dave and Pete could hear the lawyer's stifled imprecations and vicious slappings till slumber overpowered them.

By morning Ainsworth was pretty well chewed, and stupid with loss of sleep. He bathed in the lake water while the others got breakfast, but the experiment was painful. The flies feasted on him while he undressed, whenever his head and shoulders rose above the surface, and when he dressed again. It seemed that they recognized no intermissions and countenanced no union hours.

On Tagish Lake an exasperating headwind baffled the canoeists as on the preceding day. Ainsworth soon caught the swing of the paddle, and his blade flickered and dipped in time with those of the steerer and the bowman.

Striking the sweep of the rolling waves, he had to bail until they could no longer make any advance. Along the shoreline they went overboard, Dave hauling ahead with the towline, while the lawyer and Pete pushed on the canoe through the nasty breakers. Hour by hour they struggled strenuously and unceasingly, the surf soaking them to their necks. Ainsworth did not like it, but the wet was better than flies.

A halt was made at Tagish Post for rest and recuperation, after which they pushed on with more favorable weather through Lake Marsh and reached the head of Box Cañon. The strip of water between it and the foot of White Horse Rapids is treacherously bad, so they portaged where they could not line, and skirted the famous chutes.

Five Finger Rapids gave them a tough struggle, and snags capsized them twice, but they accomplished the descent on the third attempt and entered deep

river water. Here the current ran tremendously strong, and only where they could not tow did they use the paddles. Towing was heart-breaking work, the ragged undergrowth, splintered rocks, and bays, necessitating ugly wading, proving drains on their strength. They fought the racing currents with the short, snappy Indian stroke and drove through swirling whirlpools, called eddies, at the expense of all their reserve power. At the Police post on the Big Salmon they slept like dead men, and started late the next day.

The rest of the canoe route into Dawson was not so trying. They made up some lost time and reached Dawson City on the date Ainsworth had set as the limit within which he had promised the bonus.

"You win, men," Ainsworth said, as their trim craft rocked in the swell of a steamer which had just cast off her shore-lines when they neared the wharf.

"We do, sure," grunted Pete, with a complacent smile. "When we calculate on doin' somethin' by a set time, it's generally done, ain't it, Dave?"

"It is, sure," Dave agreed, his interest being more attracted by the bustle on the landing than the discussion of what they had done.

The bank was lined with Dawson's inhabitants, for the boat service was the most vital part of their existence, and their attention hung on the arrival or departure of every steamer. A mixed assemblage covered the small dock, and in it were Indians, traders, capitalists, prospectors, dog-mushers, and women. The boat itself carried a number of passengers, and a great cargo of outgoing baggage and freight littered its decks. The big paddle-wheels churned fiercely in the stream, and a dinning clamor of farewell rose up from those on the shore as the Yukon boat swung with the middle current.

The Peterborough took the place alongside the wharf which the steamer had vacated, and the three occupants at once became objects of inspection.

"Hullo, Dave! Hullo, Pete!" their friends among the crowd greeted.

"Where ye bin?" asked Old Jim Parsons, a famous and ancient musher. "Bin sort o' travellin' some, hain't ye?"

"Runnin' against time," Pete grinned, "an' we win! Where's that big gun you call Britton?"

"Gone down the river just afore ye come," answered a voice in the throng. "Seen him take his canoe! He ain't gone more'n five minutes."

"Ah!" mused Ainsworth, "so he doesn't ride in a launch now!"

Old Jim Parsons shuffled his feet irritably on the landing.

"Launch!" he ejaculated in high scorn. "Don't ye know he's the best blade on the river? No dod-blasted sputter-boat fur him!"

The old musher's snort of indignation followed them down the stream, and Ainsworth chuckled in a satisfied manner. After all, a man who preferred his canoe to a launch was man enough to listen to sound reason.

They ran upon him suddenly in a little bay some distance down stream. He had paddled easily, being out for an evening hour, and beached his canoe on the shingle of a half-submerged river bar. He sat upon a rock at the water's edge, smoking and looking into the depths.

As they approached, Ainsworth discerned another figure near Britton.

"He's not alone," he commented. "Do you know the person who is with him?"

Pete stared under his hand, for the evening sun slanted over the wooded ridge with a dazzling glare which prevented easy vision.

"No, by gad," he said in a loud whisper, "fur it wears skirts!"

The bowman was startled, and his brown palm also shaded his dark eyes.

"It does, sure," Dave gasped. His serenity was so disturbed that, he thumped the gunwale with the paddle grip.

"Blast you," snarled the outraged Pete, "do you want him to think we're a pair of bloomin' skiff-rowers?" Dave subsided in discomfiture at the deserved reprimand.

Britton had caught the thump, and looked up.

"Ye gods," he cried, "a miracle! A miracle has come to pass!" Beneath his flippancy there ran a vibrant tone of delight.

"Yes, a miracle of exertion!" Ainsworth asserted. "I've undertaken a cursed journey for your sake, Britton; I have been pounded, devoured, and drowned in the effort to get here by the thirtieth of July. Take my word for it that I don't want another similar trip. It has been a devilish task. Ask the men!"

"It has, sure," the Chilcoot men said in one voice, without waiting to be questioned.

The Peterborough had drawn in close to the perpendicular rock upon which Rex Britton sat, and they could not then see the woman who was sitting on the lower beach near the other canoe where it rested on the bar.

"And why this haste, O prophet?" Britton laughed. "And why this trip, at all?"

"When a man buries himself alive and his resurrection becomes necessary, someone has to attend to that rising," Ainsworth said. "The someone is very often his legal adviser!"

Britton smiled with a touch of tenderness. He loved Ainsworth for his odd, swift manners of action and speech and for his unalterable fidelity. An inkling of the trend of events had come to him, but he could not show it, and Ainsworth's solicitude was comforting.

"Still, I am completely in the dark," he persisted.

"Then you haven't much perception," the lawyer growled. "The Honorable Oliver Britton is dead, and he has left you Britton Hall!"

Rex sprang upright on the rock in his astonishment; then laughed shortly, as he resumed his seat, stuffing nervously at his pipe.

"That won't go down," he observed sardonically. "I remember what my uncle said to me that last night in Sussex."

Ainsworth leaned out of the packs in the middle of the canoe, speaking in an eager, intense voice.

"Can I read testaments?" he asked. "Do I know law?"

"As none other in England," Rex replied softly.

"Then believe what I have told you," the lawyer said. "I play with no one, and I wish no one to play with me. Your uncle died last month of pneumonia. Britton Hall is willed to you!"

Rex thrust a muscle-wrapped arm over the rock. "Come up," he said, "and tell me all about it. Tell me what they are doing at home. How's Trascott and–and the old place?" His eyes were alight because the sea-girt downs of Sussex still had a spell for him.

Ainsworth stood up carefully in the centre of the Peterborough while his men balanced it against the granite with flattened paddles. He put the toe of one scarred cruiser in a crack of the perpendicular wall, and grasping the outstretched hand, he was lifted to a seat beside Britton.

"Trascott's fine," the lawyer said, "and the old place is as green as ever. We both had a grand run over it with the hounds just before your uncle was stricken. The fox was started in that bit of furze by Bowley Creek, where we used to snare rabbits when you were a kid and I was proud of my 'teens,' and went away with the pack in full cry over Cranston Ridge.

"A good many of the hunters came croppers at that marshy brook and high hedge fence, but Trascott and I stuck on with the best of them. We were first in at the finish beyond Bramfell Heath, and we got the brush."

"It must have been a good run," Rex breathed. "I can see every stick and stone of it now. Yes, I could ride it blindfold if I were back there."

The lawyer put his hand on Britton's thick, brown arm.

"You're going back with me," he said calmly. "It's not a matter of desire but a case of responsibility; yet if you would rather follow desire, there are enough attractions over home.

"Who wouldn't want to be lord of the finest estate in the county? Then there is the yacht–it goes to you–and the stables of hunters and polo ponies; there is the London mansion which is part of the property; the pheasants are a prime lot, and the trout streams have been lately stocked."

Ainsworth paused to let stirring memories work their effect.

"And the responsibility?" Britton asked after a moment's silence.

"That clinches things," Ainsworth declared. "It is incumbent upon you to

fitly fill your uncle's place. They want you back home! The servants are awaiting their young master; the cricketers and polo players have you already on the teams; the sailors rejoice because you will command them; hostesses all over the county have sent me social invitations in view of your return to England. You must go back, Britton, for the sake of the Britton name. You must perpetuate the name and the lineage!"

The lawyer became so earnest that he gestured with his arms in an unaccustomed fashion, while Rex gazed thoughtfully at the broad river swirls laving the white shore-line and spraying overhanging bushes. The sun showed a half disc of crimson above a distant bluff, sending a last flood of ruddy light over the spot where the two friends reclined; below them the tired Chilcoot paddlers nodded in their motionless craft lying close against the seamed wall of ironstone; the curve of the rock shoulder still hid the woman, who had not moved from the beach.

"Suppose I don't go back," ventured Britton, dreamingly.

"If you don't, it all goes to the auctioneer's block. Your uncle put a condition and a date in his will. You either take possession within two months or they sell the estate for charity."

Rex sprang up a second time, spurred by Ainsworth's announcement.

"Sell Britton Hall!" he cried. "By my soul, they had better not think of it. I would come from the grave to prevent that!"

"Thank the Lord," breathed Ainsworth, in immense relief. "I haven't labored in vain!"

He arose also and seized Britton's hand. "Swear on this handshake!" he ordered, and Rex took the vow.

"Now that you have promised, I can tell you something else," the lawyer observed. "I am glad that I did not have to use it as a means of influencing you. Boy, listen! They want you to represent New Shoreham."

Ainsworth made the declaration with a tinge of paternal pride.

"They want me!" Britton exclaimed. "I couldn't do it. I–why–"

"Never mind," interrupted his friend, "I know your objections by heart, the depreciation of your abilities and all the rest of it. Let that pass, and give ear to common sense! The community of New Shoreham has gone from bad to worse since Oliver Britton chucked its representation for the diplomatic service. The name of Britton was a power there with the lower classes and the aristocracy alike, but during the last few years, its want has been felt. The place has been torn by political strife, rival factions, and unscrupulous candidates.

"They want a Britton to lead them again. After your uncle's retirement, the big men pleaded with him to enter the arena once more, and I believe he would have yielded to their entreaties had death spared him.

"Now they clamor for you in his stead. Only a Britton will satisfy them.

Commercial interest as well as political prosperity hangs on that name. Don't offer refusal! I won't hear of it; Trascott will not listen to it; and no member of the place can bear its mention."

Ainsworth's vehemence wakened the paddlers, and they slapped the water idly with their blades. The crimson disc of the sun had vanished. The river surface changed to a perfect violet hue.

"It's a big thing," said Britton, slowly–"tremendously big, and it has come like a Bennett wind!"

"The day of nomination is the same date that your uncle fixed for the condition of taking possession," Ainsworth remarked. "Thus there was a double reason for my haste, and the reasons still hold. We must make a start for home immediately. Delays may arise, and we can't run the thing too fine."

Rex knocked the dead tobacco from his pipe on the heel of his prospecting boot.

"Yes," he mused, "we'll go back to the downs, but my comprehension is still slow."

"If you serve well, they'll put the word 'Honorable' before your name," his friend commenced in a lighter vein. "Then you know there's the daughter of the Duchess! You used to be sweet on her when you were attending Oxford."

Britton started suddenly at a recollection, though not at the one Ainsworth had prompted, and looked toward the river bar.

"Yes, tell me what the woman is doing there," the lawyer begged, following his glance. "I have refrained from asking any questions."

"She is painting a sunset scene," Rex replied in a hard, overstrained tone. "She likes to be quite alone when sketching."

Then he called out: "Mercia! Have you finished?"

"One moment, Rex," a bell-like voice answered from the shingle. "I am nearly through."

"Let us go down," Britton suggested, offering no explanation as to who the lady was.

They crunched down upon the gravel, and mental association of an unconscious variety brought Ainsworth the remembrance of another woman, the woman who had come across their course at Algiers.

"Where are Maud Morris, her husband, and Simpson?" he asked.

"Maud Morris is in Dawson," Britton replied. "The other two are dead."

"Dead!" echoed the lawyer, in genuine amazement.

"Yes," said Rex, "Morris succumbed from drink and exposure at Samson Creek two days ago. He had taken some winter side-trip which was too much for his constitution. They said his wife had the decency to go to him on his deathbed."

"And Simpson?" eagerly inquired Ainsworth.

"Pierre Giraud shot him for insulting Giraud's wife, last winter."

"Jove!" exclaimed the lawyer. "Your North believes in swift justice. What was done with the voyageur?"

"He escaped to the wilds," Rex said, "but returned later, and was arrested by the Mounted Police."

Ainsworth indulged in no comment because they had reached the woman painter. She turned, smiling, at their footsteps, and the lawyer stared dazedly at the image of Maud Morris.

"Mercia," said Britton, "this is Ainsworth, the friend of whom I have so often spoken. Ainsworth, let me present my wife!"

The beautiful, girlish figure held out her hand, but the lawyer recoiled, glancing angrily at Rex.

"What trick is this?" he cried, but when he studied the sweet face before him again, his senses received a shock.

He bent forward, using his keen eyes more searchingly, and surveyed her with a scrutiny well nigh rude. It gradually dawned on him that this was not Maud Morris but someone moulded in her likeness with a purer, intensified beauty.

"Forgive me, forgive me!" he burst out impetuously. "I mistook you for a woman who is–who is not fit to be any man's wife." He seized her both hands now and pressed them respectfully and penitentially.

Britton took his wife's arm with an air of jealous ownership while she gazed up at him, a tremulous expression of wonder in her eyes as if the action were new to her and unexplainable.

"No," said Rex, somewhat passionately, "this isn't the other woman whom you know, Ainsworth. Mercia is the soul which the other never had!"

CHAPTER XVII.

Lady Rossland's reception for the New Shoreham candidate on the evening preceding the nomination day was a thing of note.

For the space of ten hours, Britton had been out among his constituents with Lord Rossland, Ainsworth, and Trascott, who had come down from his London work to witness the honors bestowed upon his friend. At seven o'clock, Rex returned alone to Britton Hall, the curate and the lawyer having gone on with

Rossland to his country-seat, where the function was to be held.

The strain of canvassing had been more wearisome than a day of Yukon mushing, but dinner and a bath refreshed him. Upstairs, he called his wife's maid.

"At what time has your mistress ordered the carriage?" he asked.

"Nine o'clock, sir,–if that will suit you." The maid spoke almost timidly, as if she recognized some gulf between husband and wife, and feared that their plans for the evening might conflict.

"That will do very well," Britton decided. "Tell her I will await her at nine."

He crossed to his own suite and entered the bedroom, where Bassing, his man, had laid out his clothes. He knew the room of old, and a glow of possession thrilled him. The magnificence of its appointing was a delight. The heavy furniture, the lofty fretted ceiling, the ponderous chandelier, and thick Oriental curtains, unaltered in setting for three generations, gave an impression of stability which had a far-reaching effect. His grandfather had slept, as he himself slept, in the high canopied bed with its massive carved corner posts, and ancestral pride buoyed up Britton to the heights of egotism.

He dressed slowly and carefully, with a due consciousness of the relation between appearance and personality, and descended the stairs at five minutes to nine. The carriage had not yet drawn up in the driveway, nor had Mercia come from her apartments. By the door stood Crandell, the footman who had served his uncle, and who regarded the advent of the young master with satisfaction.

For five minutes Rex waited, and the carriage wheels shrieked on the gravel as the driver wheeled his horses sharply in front of the great arched entrance. A silver-chimed clock pealed nine in the drawing-room, and the soft rustle of Mercia's garments sounded on the stairway.

Britton looked up involuntarily, his face flushing slightly. His wife's beauty was a revelation to which no man could deny homage; she carried herself with distinction enhanced by a peculiar, free rhythm of movement which is a heritage of the life in the open. Her individuality seemed a blending of youthful bloom with a certain mature, womanly power born of the true conception of existence.

And marring her sweet winsomeness, was a scarcely observable flaw, a cold reserve maintained, apparently, not of inward intention but by the outward pressure of circumstance. This unbidden attribute matched Britton's unemotional, respectful attitude, presenting, as it were, foil to foil in the guarding of a common neutrality.

"Let me hold your cloak," he said deferentially.

She suffered his help with a distant, though polite, acknowledgment, and Crandell opened the door. The horses pranced impatiently upon the white sand before the portico, and Mercia hurried out. Her husband followed quickly, handed her in, and they dashed away.

The drive to Rossland House was made practically in silence. Britton spoke once, remarking on the hot night and predicting rain.

Outside Lord Rossland's grand country-seat their equipage fell in line, stopped at the steps, and let them down. They found themselves traversing the length of the front hall, which opened on the splendid reception-rooms.

It was nearly twelve months since Britton had mingled with society of this class, that is, of his own county, and he experienced the feeling of an actor who plays an unfamiliar part. The sensation stamped his bearing and augmented that chill reserve which had never been present before he left England. He attempted to shake it off in the exchange of greetings with Lord and Lady Rossland and others. In this he succeeded to a certain degree, and when he had made the round of presentation as the coming member, the contact with his fellows wore away the shyness.

He was separated from his wife, and, flattered by Rossland's patronage and amused by Ainsworth's ironic comment on everything they saw, Britton's affability grew more marked.

Toward the supper-hour he found Mercia again in the rooms, in company with Lady Rossland.

"Here is the truant," cried her ladyship, laughing. "We searched everywhere for you, sir."

"No truant, my dear," put in Lord Rossland. "I have been heaping his responsibilities upon him."

"But here is a responsibility he has forgotten–his wife," objected Lady Rossland, in feigned reproach. "Reginald, take her in to supper. A score of men have begged the honor, but I have been obdurate for your sake!"

Britton bowed ostentatiously, catching her ladyship's bantering spirit, yet a shade of that cloudy reserve dampened his manner as he took his wife's arm. They passed on to the supper-rooms, with the Rosslands leading and his lordship's sister behind with Kinmair, editor and owner of *The Daily Challenge*, one of the most powerful organs in London. Kinmair, next to Lord Rossland, was Britton's staunchest supporter.

They made a merry group at the profusely decorated tables, and because the evening grew so warm in spite of wide open doors and swinging casements, the quarter-hour's refreshment proved grateful.

"Now," announced her ladyship, when they emerged from the roses and palms, "you are thrown upon your own resources. There are the galleries, the gardens, billiards, and cigars! You may play bridge up-stairs, dance in the drawing-rooms, row upon the river, or interview the spirit reader in the conservatory."

Britton raised his eyebrows.

"Ah!" he smiled, "–a new departure?"

"It is all the rage in London now," explained Lord Rossland's sister, Dora. "Everyone has a theosophist at their evening functions to give a séance or read futures."

Rex laughed a little, thinking of the great, tight-locked Yukon where the issues of life and death prohibited any such toys or trifling.

"I–I am afraid I am somewhat behind the times," he ventured, looking at Mercia for a brief instant.

"Then you shall be initiated into the mysteries at once," cried Lady Rossland, "and I must conduct you to Madame Spiritualist. A politician should know his future. Should he not, Mrs. Britton?"

"If I were a politician, I should hardly dare to gaze on it," Mercia smiled. "Disappointment might be lying somewhere in wait."

"Men have no such fears," Lord Rossland blustered in his kindly way. "If they had, they would never reach the top, and Britton has, I believe, a brilliant career waiting for him. But, my dear, if you are going to act as his guide, I shall take Mrs. Britton through the galleries. She wished to see the paintings."

"Thank you, yes," said Mercia. "I have heard of your famous pictures, and I adore the art."

"She has the great gift, Rossland," observed Rex, turning aside with her ladyship, "and she may tell you things even about your own canvases."

Kinmair and Lord Rossland's sister went into the garden among the fountains, while Lady Rossland took her recruit to the conservatory. On the way they passed the billiard-rooms and saw Ainsworth engaged in his customary game with the redoubtable Trascott. Her ladyship smiled at their earnest devotion to the stroke.

"Your friends are fine men," she remarked appreciatively. "I doubt if there are in England two grander representatives of their respective professions."

"I believe you," agreed Britton, with a sudden gravity approaching severity, "but here we are."

They had reached the conservatory, and Lady Rossland's nephew came out with a slip of paper in his hand. Her ladyship bad commissioned him to act as the theosophist's assistant and play the part of scout. He was a slim, light-haired youth, and his aunt had insisted at his christening that he should be named Guy.

"Hello," said Guy, "your palmist has given me a list of guests for whom she wants to gaze. Here it is! You're first on the paper, Britton. See? Now go along and get through while I bring your successor."

He pushed Rex inside and closed the door, taking his aunt away with him.

"Now was that name on the list coincidence or design?" Britton asked himself before he came to the end of the conservatory's corridor.

One corner of the cool place had been curtained off with blue silk hangings

as a retreat for the spiritualist. Her tiny tent was closed and lighted from within by a red-globed lamp which gave a subdued effect. The pavilion was arranged thus to give the palmist the advantage of illumination while her subject stood outside in partial darkness.

Rex felt awkward and ill at ease at the weighty sense of desolation which filled the long, empty conservatory. His footsteps paused uncertainly, but the waiting priestess heard them.

"Come closer please," she said in a muffled tone that sounded disguised.

Britton obeyed the summons with an increasing sensation of awkwardness for which he was at a loss to account. He stood so near the soft curtains that they brushed his body without weight, like fine cobwebs, and he could perceive a small horizontal slit in the pavilion's side which was not noticeable before. Set back of it, so as to block the vision and prevent an inspection of the interior, was a Japanese screen in weird colors.

His mind was filled with an irritation aroused by the feminine whim that had sent him to this place. The whole environment jarred on him as possessing an illusion disproportionate to his mental vision.

"Well?" he demanded in a voice which set the responsibility for his coming on the head of the person within the gaudy pavilion.

There was a noise inside that seemed like a smothered exclamation of surprise together with a vague rustle of woman's garments, and the same muffled tone as before became audible, though it seemed shaken and difficult to control.

"Extend your palms through the opening," was the subdued order of the spirit reader.

Rex hesitated. The incongruity of this dallying imbued a sort of rankling disgust for its exponent and an ashamed opinion of himself.

"You are a doubter?" the unseen spiritualist asked. Her inflection was one of sarcasm.

Britton laughed scornfully. "It is hardly worth while," he replied.

"But still you belong to the sceptic class," the voice insisted. "Please extend your hands. I promise you that you will be surprised at my methods."

Rex stirred his feet, the motion making an inordinately loud noise in the deserted place. He listened when the echoes ceased, but young Guy Rossland had not returned. He was doubtless having some trouble in finding Britten's successor.

"I promise to surprise you," repeated the palmist.

"Surprise!–yes," Rex assented. "Convincing is a different matter. You know I have not followed the fad."

"Nevertheless, I think conviction is hard upon you," came the declaration from the tent. "Will you give me a trial?" There was a defiant note in the question.

"That is but fair, now you speak of it," said Britton, mockingly. He thrust his

arms through the slit with a total lack of ceremony.

A pair of soft, electric palms took his, and the current of the hidden woman's presence flowed through every vein in his body.

Rex stood immovable as if a secret shock had fixed his feet. He cried out with an inarticulate exclamation because he knew the touch, but his paralyzed vocal organs would frame no speech. A short, dramatic silence succeeded his outcry. The drone of a clumsy, waking fly beat distinctly on the panes; the creak of oar-locks on the river rose insistently through the open conservatory windows; beneath the sills the gentle plashing of the fountain water changed to a gurgle of wicked glee.

In the silence, Britton was beginning to find his self-possession, when the sorceress spoke, her voice now undisguised.

"It's centuries and ages since we were so close, Rex," she said–and the magnetic hands were glued to his in a melting, appealing touch. "Isn't it ages and ages?" she continued passionately.

Britten's answer was a cry like that of a trapped bear. He wrenched his hands loose, swept away the intervening curtains, as he once swept the silken portières from an old-time boudoir, and stood face to face with the siren it had held. She had taken off her veiled turban, and her eyes shone like stars, with a former potent lure.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Everything whizzed about Britton for a few seconds. In the red glow of light from the demolished pavilion, the floor throbbed and rocked like the deck of a yacht, and the glass walls of the conservatory tilted up sharply. Rex put a hand on the wire which had held the curtains and steadied himself.

"So it was design," he said harshly, accusingly.

One glance at his face told Maud Morris that honeyed words could not subjugate him. Appeal was rendered useless for her purpose; there remained compulsion. She stepped back a little at his grim anger till she leaned against some flowering vine in the corner window-box. Between them stood a small table on which rested the adjuncts of her pretended art.

"Yes," she corroborated, with a flicker of satire, "it was design. You know, Rex, that I have no faith whatever in coincidence. You believed me to be thousands

of miles away in Dawson City?"

"Why have you dogged me?" demanded Britton, bluntly. "To impersonate Mrs. Grundy as you did last winter in that same place?"

"Was it so illy done?" she questioned in turn, with a cruel intonation. Her fingers broke a bloom from the vine, and she caressed it with her lips.

"It was art–fine art," Rex bitterly declared, "and it accomplished the intended purpose of involving me in an intricacy of despair. Your appearance here hints at a repetition of that trouble. Is that your object? Have you trailed me in order to work fresh mischief?" He spoke with the air of a man driven to bay, one whose impulse is to face and have done with a difficulty once for all.

"The question of mischief-making rests with yourself," Maud Morris temporized. "I admit that I followed you, faked connections with the Mahatma Institute in order to be present to-night––"

"Why to-night?" Britton interrupted, regarding the soulless thing searchingly.

"I wished to see you before tomorrow," the woman answered, "before you accept that nomination." She turned away a little to the open window and looked indifferently out upon the long, shadowed gardens, as if placing no weight upon her observation.

The action vindicated a former power of command, and a momentary triumph was obtained. Rex dropped his uplifted hand from the wire so swiftly that the tautened metal sang in a high-pitched crescendo, and he took two quick steps to her side.

"You are deeper than any Mahatma witch," he said tersely, "and there is something behind your words. Why did you wish to see me before the Convention tomorrow?"

There was a short pause while she picked reflectively at the sleeve of the loose Oriental gown which enveloped her supple body. Then she faced Britton squarely, her blue-green eyes glowing into his.

"Because you will never accept that nomination," she answered dramatically.

The unexpected shot told. Rex started, but the necessity of the moment recalled his sang-froid, and he showed no sign of inward perturbation.

"I surprise you?" She was feeling for the effect with both voice and eye.

"Surprise?" Rex parleyed. "Why should I be surprised at anything you do or say? My experience with and observation of you has been infinitely varied and valuably instructive. No, I am not at all astonished, only mystified. You will, of course, explain!"

She bit her lip in obvious displeasure at her failure to move him and at his cool criticism of her fickle, spiteful disposition, which had been revealed all too fully in times that were dead to Britton. She made a slight, almost imperceptible

motion that brought her nearer to him.

"You will, of course, explain," Rex repeated, coldly attentive.

"Willingly!" she abruptly exclaimed. "The man who came alone out of Five Mountain Gulch can never represent New Shoreham when New Shoreham knows the facts connected with that great Five Mountain strike!" She met Britton's intense gaze with a level glance full of a subtle confidence and waited for his utter confusion, the anticipated result of her significant explanation.

But the anticipated result was not realized in that way! The perturbing effect she expected did not follow her pointed words. That they had any influence on Britton was shown only by the stiffening of his shoulders and the squaring of his stern jaw. The absence of fear, the presence of which had been exultingly foreseen by Maud Morris, tended to vaguely disconcert her.

"Your impression does not coincide with mine?" she asked at last, indecision being noticeable in her tone.

Britton reached out both arms, resting his palms heavily on the window-sill, and looked at her with head turned sidewise. His profile in the subdued red light was grim and powerful as granite sculpturing.

"Suppose," he began brusquely, "that New Shoreham knows. What is left for the man?"

Maud Morris smiled. "Your intuition is almost womanly," she said with returning assurance. "For the man? I should surely suggest some far-away, far-away part where no one knows or cares. There the man would easily find respite, especially if he had the companionship of, say, a very old friend, a–a friend whom perhaps he once regarded highly." Her meaning was flagrantly vivid. The night breeze stirred her garments, wafting a faint, enervating perfume to Britten's nostrils. The fountain water plashed timidly now, and the spectral shadows crouched on the clipped lawns. Over the thick woodland copse the angry lightning clawed the black horizon into a million red-edged fragments. Rex found himself in a position singularly difficult and unpleasant. It bordered even on the dangerous. Mingled irresolution and indignation handicapped him in a measure, but he decided to persevere in sounding this woman's intentions to the very bottom.

"Granted that the oblivion you speak of and the escape from consequence could be so found," Britton said, "there is a thing which you persist in overlooking, the possibility of the man having a wife."

A warning note of wrath accompanied Britton's last word. Any keen ear might have recognized it, but Maud Morris was so engrossed with the working out of the systematic project upon which she had embarked that she missed the voiced danger signal.

"I do not overlook that," she remarked with an inconsequent shrug. "I ignore it!"

All Britton's suppressed anger broke bounds and flamed to the surface. He whirled suddenly and struck his clenched right hand in the open palm of his left.

"Look here," he cried, coming to the point with a graphic directness which was a most creditable trait of his character, "I think I have grasped your meaning and your proposition. I must refuse this nomination, desert my wife, and disappear in a foreign country or you will tell what you know of Five Mountain Gulch. Am I right?"

"On the whole, yes," she replied, maintaining her brazen serenity in the face of his wrath. "I swore I would separate you from that little saint, and, before heaven, I will!"

"Why did you not act before, in Dawson?"

"I learned what I know at Samson Creek when Morris died," she said impetuously. "You had started for England when I got back to Dawson. I came on your heels, and I am to have my revenge."

"So your informant was Morris," Rex commented with a certain relief. "Do you expect to intimidate me by the use of a dying man's delirium, by means of some irrational tale? Let me tell you, Maud Morris, that I have walked too close to real danger to be frightened by a phantom!"

"Morris knew everything," she cried vehemently. "He followed you all the way up the Klondike to Five Mountain Gulch and saw you shoot Lessari."

Britton reeled, self-control shocked out of him.

"Morris did?" he stammered–"but it was self-defence–"

"Was it?" she interrupted, leering into his face with supercilious smiles. "Would the public believe it? Have you an atom of proof? You may say that the lack of proof, of substantiation, works both ways. That may be, but proof is not necessary for my purpose. The simple statement, the all-pervading rumor, the unpreventable scandal, will do far better. Do you see where you are now, Rex,–the old, proud Rex? Do you know where you are? Yes, you do–in my hand!" She slowly closed her outstretched fingers.

Egotistical triumph gleamed in her every lineament. Britton, wrestling with his deep problem, did not mark her expression, for he had made a vital discovery which filled him with mental disgust.

"I know now the mysteries of the poisoned dogs and the sled plunging into the abyss," he announced in a horrified way, "and I can tell you where your husband is at this moment. Morris is in hell, suffering torment for a double murder! Twice in that frozen wilderness he apparently compassed our destruction with the most diabolical intent. He is as guilty as if Lessari and myself had both died at his hand."

Britton's awful earnestness embarrassed her, but she made a pretence of laughing sceptically. Distant thunder echoed with her laugh in low growlings and

mutterings, and the far-off rising downs were nakedly etched by vivid, incessant streaks of lightning as if the mountain spirits were working themselves up to a climax of passion that must culminate in a ruthless and pathetic tragedy.

The strains of the orchestra in the drawing-rooms were drowned by the threatenings of the storm, and Rex could hear people hurrying in from the gardens and lawns and from the river to reach cover and escape the expected deluge. An unconscious wonderment as to whether young Guy Rossland had lost himself in searching for the next man whose name was on the theosophist's list passed through Britton's mind. The false theosophist herself interrupted his pondering.

"If Morris is guilty through intent," she said, "what of your own deed?" The shallow mockery of her glance belied the sense of judicious importance she tried to attach to her utterance. Rex commenced to see at last that the woman was but playing for a stake and holding all the trumps.

"I feel no guilt, nothing but remorse," he replied, "for I stand clear of any deliberate act."

"But you cannot prove it," she cautioned. "Picture public condemnation and horror when they know!"

"Go and tell them," Rex fiercely returned, accepting with his accustomed thrill the combat which could not be averted.

"Ah!" she exclaimed. "Then with such permission I shall tell your wife first."

Britton winced visibly, and his face was bereft of its ruddy color. He caught the woman's wrists with the motion of crushing a venomous thing.

"Good God, you vampire!" he cried.

She had used some weapon known only to themselves, and, judging by its effect on the two standing thus, the weapon was one of incalculable cruelty.

CHAPTER XIX.

The conservatory door flew open with a rattle of shattered glass, admitting Lady Rossland and Mercia fleeing from the gardens amid the spattering raindrops.

"Oh!" they exclaimed simultaneously, on catching sight of the tableau where the silken tent had stood. "Oh!" Mercia's voice was low and hurt. Lady Rossland's rose up, pitched higher in an outraged tone.

Britton dropped the wrists he had grasped and turned toward the two women, humiliation written on his grave face, but the pride of Mercia would not

allow her to wait for a forthcoming apology.

"I fancy we intrude," she said coldly. "Come, Lady Rossland, we can probably reach the house." Her ladyship wheeled across the doorstep, flashing back scornful eyes, and took Mercia's arm as they hurried out.

Rex gave an eager, pleading cry and darted forward.

"Wait," he cried entreatingly. "You are misjudging–"

But they were gone in the darkness, having raced up the gravel walk to the great illuminated house! The big, round drops wetted Britton's cheeks and dashed on his head. A moment he stood on the flags at the door, yearning to follow and explain, but a more vital and immediate necessity lay behind him in the conservatory.

He turned back, keeping himself forcibly in hand, determined on a summary and decisive dealing with the pregnant issue thrust upon him by Maud Morris.

"That," he said to her, "was the most humiliating thing any wife could see, yet it meant nothing at all!"

A change had come over her since the sudden apparition of the two women in the doorway. The fear of failure, inspired by the sweet, pure beauty of Mercia, seemed to hold her in its grip, and she called to her aid the old resource of alluring appeal.

"Don't say that, Rex," she pleaded, with a touch of pathos. "Have you altogether forgotten the old days? There must be memories sometimes!"

"No," said Britton, doggedly, "I could not remember them if I would."

"You are very trying," she murmured, petulant as a crossed child. "Can you not listen to reason?"

"There is only one way of reasoning soundly and in accordance with universal law," Rex answered with conviction. "That reasoning is along the line of right. I am prepared to follow it to the bitter end."

She looked up in amazement during a short interval.

"Do you realize all that your words imply?" she questioned incredulously. "I cannot think you do!"

"Yes, everything they imply," he answered, filled with the weary languor attendant upon nervous strain.

She was not left to surmise. Britton's meaning was plain. Her confidence began to shake.

"The alternative!" she began plaintively, "–surely you have understood me!"

"Too well," laughed Britton, harshly, "and I would rather go to prison–which I shall certainly not do, since, as you say, there is no proof!"

The woman's cheeks and brow went crimson with annoyance coupled with shame; she felt the demoralizing force of man's scorn.

"Rather than take that alternative, you will suffer me to tell Mercia?" she

asked uncertainly.

"No," Rex answered in a ringing voice, "for I am going to tell her!"

She gasped. "You!" she exclaimed precipitately. "It is suicide! Are you entirely mad?"

There was in the woman's manner the recognition of an impending catastrophe, the knowledge of immeasurable possibilities. Britton instinctively felt her disappointment, and it helped to bring back to him, in a fair degree, his original assurance, confidence, and reliance.

"It will be the sanest thing I ever did," he declared.

Then the mask of the woman's plotting and machination fell, and she stood revealed in her uncertain status of life, fighting for what she loved in her own contemptible way.

"Rex, Rex," she cried incoherently, "I can't let you do that. My God, you know what it would mean!"

She grasped his hands in her intolerable fear, but he rescued them with a calm gesture. The action saved them from a second surprise.

The greenhouse door burst open more violently than before, and Guy Rossland stamped up and down in a pair of rain-soaked pumps, sending the wet flying in all directions.

"Ruined," he said woefully, regarding his pulpy patent leathers. "By Jove, but it's a beastly night. Hello! tent blown down?"

"A gust through that open window," explained the theosophist, who had resumed her veil. "Please close it and help me with the curtain. I am afraid the rain has frightened all my subjects."

"Couldn't find Kinmair," lamented Guy, climbing on the sill to fasten the casement. "The bally idiot! He's next after Britton. Hunted him through all the gardens, and then they told me he'd gone punting. Went on the river and got caught–worse luck! Jove, my feet feel as if I were barefoot in the marsh."

"Kinmair can postpone his visit," Rex said. "Indeed, the storm will cause a general postponement. No one can come through this rain. I think I'll make a run for it!"

But he walked, seeming not to notice the violence and the downpour. The coolness was pleasing on his face, and the damp lowered the feverish temperature of his heated blood, though it proved disastrous to his immaculate dress clothes.

He could see neither Mercia nor Lady Rossland when he entered, but he encountered Trascott elaborating on philanthropies to a penniless dowager. The curate did not note Britton's personal appearance, so deep was he in a cherished plan of building orphan homes and reading rooms for the poor of London, a plan involving the expenditure of something like two millions of money.

"It's admirable," murmured the dowager, who herself had to scrape to keep

up appearances. "It's a most beautiful scheme, Mr. Trascott. You have every technicality well within your grasp. What is to prevent the carrying out of those details?"

"The money," Britton heard Trascott answer sadly. "It exists as yet only in my dreams. I have advanced my theories and worked for their realization, but the unthinking rich have not responded. Sometimes I feel as if I shall never live long enough to see my project undertaken either by my own hand or by that of a more competent man."

"Still, it is ideal," the dowager returned, as Rex moved on past them. "And it is something to cherish an ideal to the end of one's life, even if one never enjoys its realization."

Britton took the thought as applied to his own existence, especially in its present crisis, and turned it over and over in his mind while he searched the different rooms for Ainsworth.

Within Rossland's great country mansion the gaiety of the occasion was undiminished. The games, the talk, the dancing, all went on as merrily as if no tempest raged outside. The decorated chambers were illuminated with such a blaze of light that the flashes of the sky's electric current were scarcely in evidence through drawn blinds. Only the spaced, resounding roll of thunder and the crash of giant trees in the woodland groves told that a terrific storm was in progress.

In the centre of the music salon he saw the Rosslands with a crowd of guests, lamenting the disagreeable night that had driven them from the river. Mercia was not with them, and Rex felt that after the incident of the conservatory he must avoid Lady Rossland for the moment.

He crossed the hall and ran into young Guy, who, looking very flushed and disturbed, appeared to have emerged from some more or less inglorious conflict. Guy had on dry shoes, but they had not sufficed to smooth his apparently ruffled feelings.

"What's wrong?" asked Britton, remembering the youth's capacity for getting into trouble. "Been quarreling with someone in the house?"

"Quarreling? Not much–worse luck!" the boy blurted out ingenuously. "But, by Jove, aunt has the beastliest temper in Sussex! She's down on the theosophist she hired about something or other. Packed her off in the rain!"

"What?" Rex asked, interestedly. "Lady Rossland packed off the hired Mahatma woman?"

"Just that," Guy answered. "In a cab with James, through all the beastly rain–to the Crystal Hotel. That's the best in New Shoreham, and aunt told James to pay the bill."

Rex was thinking retrospectively. If his own concerns had not compelled the deepest gravity, he would have been inclined to laugh. As it was, he gave Guy

a speculative look.

"Beastly temper aunt has," the youth continued. "Jove, didn't she rate me! Gave me fits for not holding down my position–guess it must have been on account of the tent. How'd I know the stuffy thing would blow? And Kinmair, the bally idiot, on the river with Dora! drat him!"

The nephew rattled on with the frank tongue of youth, and a smile grew by degrees around Britton's mouth and eyes. It was like the smile of a soldier in the firing line when he gets an unexpected respite and forgets for a brief moment the lurking danger and the strain.

"I wouldn't take it to heart," Rex said while the smile lasted. "It wasn't your fault, Guy, and, now I come to think of it, perhaps–I–I should have closed that conservatory window."

In the smoking-room Britton found Ainsworth whom he had been seeking.

"Stay with the pole instead of the punt?" asked Ainsworth, lightly, surveying his friend's wet clothes.

"Never in my life," replied Britton, very seriously.

"Jump into the river or one of the fountains to rescue somebody?" the lawyer continued in the same bantering way, but Rex had not the heart to match his flippancy.

"Can you get Trascott away and follow us home?" he asked instead, speaking what was on his mind. "I would like you both to give me an hour after we reach the Hall. I want to get some advice and some opinions."

Ainsworth looked at him with awakened interest.

"Something on the political side, eh?" he questioned smilingly.

"Yes, partly," Rex responded. "This convention affair is involved."

"Ah!" laughed Ainsworth, "I recognize in you the true politician's trait, namely the utter inability to draw a hard and fast line between business and pleasure. But go on with your wife! Trascott and I will not be far behind if Rossland will send us in one of his carriages, and of course he will. I am indefatigable in your interests, my dear fellow, and we can talk for three hours if you like."

The lawyer went out to break Trascott's conversation with the stout dowager. Britton remained in the smoking-room a moment, writing two short letters, one to Lord Rossland and one to Kinmair. It seemed a very odd proceeding when he was inside one man's house and within reach of the other man, but it was in keeping with Britton's secret resolve.

Crossing the drawing-room in search of Mercia, he met her alone. She greeted him with the same cold, reserved smile that she habitually gave him. Her beauty forced its way to his heart and left an aching pang.

"Your view of that incident to-night was entirely wrong," he said gravely. "In an hour or two you will have the right of it. This is hardly the place for expla-

nations."

She inclined her head with a regal air which became her well, but which few women could assume because they had not the royal cast of loveliness to support it.

"Explanations are quite unnecessary," she quietly returned. "I do not ask for any."

"Yet I proffer them–at the right time," Britton said. "Please do not misunderstand me." There was courteous pleading in his voice, and it did not escape Mercia.

When they bade Lady Rossland good-night, with their own carriage and that supplied the other men standing in wait, Britton spoke to the hostess of the same thing.

"Lady Rossland," he said, "there is an explanation due you. My wife will ease your mind when I have explained to her. You will have no cause for resentment."

"I am glad of that," her ladyship observed with a bright smile, pressing his hand more warmly. "Indeed, I am very pleased to hear it. I was sure there must be some mistake."

Britton gave her the two letters. "Another favor!" he begged. "Kindly hand these to Lord Rossland and Kinmair in the morning. My request is a little strange, but I would like to have these delivered as I say."

"Certainly," laughed her ladyship. "You do not amaze me. You politicians are always involved in some intricate or uncommon scheme. These shall be handed to my husband and to Kinmair in the morning as you have requested. Good-night to you all. Take good care of your wife, sir!"

The rain thrummed on the canopy covering the walk like a hundred small drums beating tattoos as they hastened to the carriages.

Britton's stood first, the horses frantic with the roar of the sky's heavy artillery. Rex took advantage of a lull in their plunging and handed Mercia in.

They dashed away into the oppressive darkness, thick as a North Sea fog, seeing but little beyond the pale circle cast by their carriage lamps. Intermittent wicked blue flashes revealed the surrounding country at intervals of a second's duration, and a fleeting, dreary panorama was unrolled. These momentary glimpses showed the winding black road running in murky rivulets; they uncovered copses and groves with foliage bedraggled and rent, with branches torn from the trunks, so that their white scars flickered ghost-like beneath the lightning's glare; they photographed a flooded stretch of down lashed by the descending cloud-torrents and vanishing mysteriously into the ungauged distance.

Mercia leaned back upon the carriage cushions without speaking. Her diamonds quivered when the lightning came, and Britton could mark her wonderful profile.

A startling sense of the unreality of his married life lay upon him; the impassableness of the secret gulf separating him from his wife was most poignantly impressed.

"Mercia," he began, "I–I wonder–" and paused hesitatingly.

"What?" she asked, gravely meeting his eyes in a spasmodic flash of electricity.

"I wonder if you remember that evening we came over the trail by Indian River," Britton continued, "the night you saved my life!"

"Yes, I remember," she answered, studiously calm. "That was the beginning." Her voice showed that she did not wish to continue in that train of thought. Rex sighed and pressed as close to his side of the vehicle as he could till they swept through the curved drive of Britton Hall.

Rossland's borrowed carriage bowled up behind, bearing the lawyer and the curate.

Ainsworth bounced upon the lighted porch beside the husband and wife.

"Awful night!" he shivered. "Must be a pack of fiends abroad! Say–what was in those letters, Britton? Anything new turned up?"

"Yes," Rex answered, "they contained my refusal of the candidature."

"The devil!" said Ainsworth.

CHAPTER XX.

The gun-room adjoined the library in Britton Hall. Ainsworth and Trascott sat in the former chamber, awaiting the advent of their host.

The red-eyed butler, who had been sleeping in a chair, appeared with a tray containing cognac and cigars to drive away the chill of the dismally wet night, but the lawyer was in such a state of anger and suspense that he wished neither brandy nor the weed.

"Put them down," he snapped. "Where's your master now?"

"Upstairs, sir, if you please," the butler stammered, confused by Ainsworth's penetrating eyes. "I presume, sir, he's changing his things–getting on dry, so to speak! He ordered me to bring you these."

Ainsworth stabbed a finger in the direction of a shell table strewn with paper cases and long brass cartridges.

"Leave them there," the irritated lawyer directed, "and get out!" The abashed

butler obeyed.

"D–n him!" Ainsworth fumed, anathematizing the master when the servant was out of hearing. "The infernal nerve of him to refuse that candidature! And to refuse it in that way! Good Lord!" He gave vent to his feelings by stamping about the gun-room, while Trascott pondered in silence, filled with a vague mistrust that some drastic coercion was responsible for Britton's action.

The furnishings of the gun-room were the usual cabinets and appliances for the chase and kindred sports. One wall, however, was hung with objects not commonly seen in an English country-seat. These were two complete Klondike outfits, a woman's and a man's.

In making the round of the chamber, Ainsworth came to them. He stopped and scrutinized the peculiar accoutrements attentively.

There were guns, rifles, revolvers, and sheath-knives strung up, all showing the scar and stain of hard service. Woolen Arctic garments, oilskins, gauntlets, and parkas, with two buckskin skirts and sweaters, hung in rows from the pegs. A duffle of moccasins, leggings, pack-straps, tump-lines, dunnage-bags and dog-whips filled a large, deep shelf, while two pairs of snowshoes, taller than a man, stood in the corner.

The lawyer examined each article in turn and suddenly faced round to Trascott.

"Can the Klondike have cracked his brain?" he asked seriously. "They say it drives scores of strong men mad!"

The curate shook his head as his glance also travelled to the equipments of the trails.

"Britton's as sane as yourself," was his answer, "but I know he is in dire anxiety. His face showed that when we came in."

Steps sounded in the library, seeming like unnecessarily loud ones calculated to give warning or to hide some other noise. The curtains, screening the doorway of the two rooms, parted very slightly, and Britton entered, throwing the hangings in place behind him.

"Ah!" grunted Ainsworth, "here you are with your insolence–"

"Don't!" interrupted Britton, putting out a hand. "Don't talk in that strain. Let me tell you a story which will explain this attitude of mine and a good many other things besides." He sat down at the cartridge table and placed his elbows on it. An expression of bitterness and renunciation rested on his face.

"Go on," said the lawyer, backing against the wall, "and speak loudly. This thunder is deafening."

A long, fierce detonation rolled and crashed in justification of his words before he had finished speaking them.

"Though I made the famous strike at Five Mountain Gulch, a strike that is

now history," Britton began in the queer silence which ensued, "I had months of a hard-luck siege in the Yukon before making my pile. In fact, when I went out of Dawson on the Samson Creek stampede, I was at the limit of my means. My last dollar was invested in my dog-team, outfit, and supplies.

"Well, the south branch of the creek, according to rumor, showed the richest, and I made a break for it. Ill luck seemed determined on dogging me, for I found South Samson staked from one end to the other. You have no idea of the complete disheartenment such a thing gives!" He paused a second, reflecting on that bygone disappointment.

"Yes, yes," assented the lawyer, somewhat impatiently; "stream all staked and not a cent with which to buy anyone out! Go on."

"I had received a hint at Tagish Post from Franco Lessari, a Corsican and a former Government courier, whom I had pulled out of Lake Bennett, that there was gold on North Samson, so I crossed to the other branch. The overflow of the stampede filed in on it, too, but lots of ground could be had. On North Samson I burned holes in the gravel and prospected in the freezing weather for some days without result. It happened that Lessari came along with the rest to this fork of the creek one night. He wanted to show me a place where a trapper had told him he had found good gold-signs, so I took him into my camp, and we moved to the locality in the morning. His outfit was very meagre; he had no tent and a minimum of poor food; my offer was a blessing to him, but I wanted to give him something in exchange for the information, even if it proved valueless."

Britton paused a second time, as if seeking to condense the massed details ahead of him. Ainsworth turned his face towards the curtained doorway.

"I feel a draft," he complained, "and that tapestry is swaying. Is there a window open?" He made a movement to investigate, but Britton stopped him with a gesture, observing:

"It's probably Gubbins, the butler, seeing if the outer buildings are safe. He's very nervous about lightning. Be patient, Ainsworth! I am coming to the end. The North Samson project didn't pan out, but we hung on there till a drunken Thron-Diuck Indian came into the camp one night. He was one of a tribe who had discovered the Five Mountain deposit, and he sold us the information, together with an eight-ounce alluvial sample which proved the truth of his assertions, for my solitary flask of whiskey.

"That bottle of firewater brought me two million dollars! It was, you say, a good bargain. But you are wrong. It was the worst barter I ever made. I wish to God I had never seen that Indian!" Britton's voice sounded with a passionate, piteous vehemence.

"Why?" cried Trascott, in wonder and sympathy. "Why?"

"Lessari and I went up the Klondike River," continued Britton, without an-

swering the curate, "toward the region of the five hills as I had mapped out the way. Never mind the details or the hardships, but listen to some points which are essential parts of what I am trying to tell. When we passed through the Klondike Cañon, we heard a dog-train coming after us, but it never appeared to our sight. Lessari fainted from fatigue and exposure within six miles of our destination. I made camp and nursed him that night. In the morning our dogs were poisoned."

"Poisoned?" echoed Ainsworth. "Great heaven!–how?"

"It was a mystery which has since been explained to me," Rex said. "Let it stand a moment!"

"But if a human hand did that it was murder," interposed the shocked Trascott. "It was deliberate, diabolical murder–the easiest method of killing you by cutting off your means of egress from that frozen wilderness!"

Rex nodded, fingering a sheathed hunting-knife that lay with the cartridges upon the table.

"Exactly so," he observed. "You have hit the truth. Lessari and I tramped on next day in the hope of finding game or discovering an Indian encampment. We kept to the river as a guide, dragging our precious food and outfit on the sled, and entered the cup of the five hills.

"There a three hundred foot chasm blocked our way. We searched for a path round it, leaving our sleigh at the top, after having first placed a slab of granite before the runners so that there was no chance of it slipping into the abyss.

"The means of circumventing the precipice we found by following along the edge till we descended into a cavern which ran through the bed-rock of the river–"

"The cavern where you made the strike?" Trascott asked, in interruption.

"Yes," Britton said. "In the midst of that excitement I heard a sound like the commencement of an avalanche. It startled me, but the noise ceased, and my assurance returned.

"I sent Lessari up for a spade, and his cry of consternation made me join him in haste. Our sled was down the crevasse!"

Ainsworth swore. The curate half started from his seat.

"I saw the mark of a dog-pad on a bit of snow," Rex said. "The granite had been removed from the front of the runners and the sled pushed into the three hundred foot abyss. The rushing noise of its descent had reached us in the cavern. It was a second, surer attempt at my murder. The destruction of food meant death. You see there was a hand in the dark all the way!"

Britton broke off, breathing heavily. It was apparent that he lived again through the things he recounted.

"Whose was that hand in the dark?" cried Ainsworth, savagely. "I believe you have found it out."

"The hand of Morris," said Rex. "I captured him stealing from caches, and

he was flogged. I heard afterwards he had sworn to kill me. He thought he ran no risk in operating that way, but the hardship of that revengeful journey was fatal. He died in the spring, as I told you, Ainsworth, two days before you came to Dawson."

"But you and Lessari!" exclaimed Trascott, excitedly, "How did you manage to survive?"

"Only one of us survived," Britton answered steadily. "Lessari had been acting queerly for two days. I think cold, vicissitude, and fear was gradually driving him mad. The loss of our food completed his upsetting, and he started to jump down the three hundred feet after the provisions, which were dust by that time.

"I pulled him back, and he turned on me with a savage wildness. I say without conceit that very few men can handle me, but I was only a child in that delirious, demoniacal strength." An extraordinarily loud crash of thunder made Britton pause. The lightning zigzagged across the room as he continued:

"In three seconds he had me on the edge of the cliff, forcing me over. It was then by chance that my hand touched the revolver in my belt. I drew it and shot!"

Trascott looked at his friend with fearful apprehension. "You shot?" he whispered, quaveringly.

Something rustled like wind or rain. Ainsworth glanced again at the sombre tapestry.

"What's that?" he asked, a slight superstitious inflection in his smooth tone. "The storm?" No one offered a different opinion, and he looked back to the rude cartridge table with the light on it and the tense faces of Trascott and Britton at either end.

"For God's sake, Britton," Trascott was tremulously saying, "let us understand this thing aright. You fired?"

"I shot Lessari dead, in self-defence," Britton replied, his countenance drawn and haggard.

CHAPTER XXI.

Trascott arose suddenly from his chair and leaned upon the table.

"My God, my God," he groaned in intense commiseration, "this is terrible–to have such a thing thrust upon you!"

The lawyer had sprung from his position of attentiveness against the wall

to the curate's side, and he, too, leaned toward Britton, who sat motionless like a carven statue.

"Self-defence!" he exclaimed forcibly. "Was there any trouble? If there will be any–"

But Rex checked him with an eloquent glance, reproving the professional instinct.

"There will be no trouble in that way," he quietly observed. "Morris witnessed the struggle and the outcome from an upper peak, but he died on his return to Samson Creek without informing anyone but his wife. Maud Morris followed me from Dawson, and to-night threatened to expose me."

"How to-night?" Trascott wonderingly asked.

"She was the Mahatma woman–the theosophist, at Lord Rowland's!"

The curate and the lawyer uttered simultaneous exclamations of helpless astonishment. Revelations were coming with such amazing rapidity and dramatic unexpectedness that speech failed the two men.

"She did not succeed in her intended intimidation," Rex said, "but she unwittingly taught me the true course to pursue in regard to this case."

"I trust that you had already recognized the true course," burst out Trascott, in an excess of eagerness.

"I too trust that same thing," Ainsworth hastened to add.

"Contrition!" said the curate.

"Indemnification!" the lawyer said.

Britton held a hand to each of them across the table.

"Thank you," he said in a choking voice, "thank you for that confidence."

"Your own survival," Ainsworth inquired, "–how was it accomplished?"

"I told you Pierre Giraud killed Simpson for insulting his wife," observed Britton. "He escaped the police and made for the mountain fastnesses, near the Klondike's head waters, with his dog-train. He found me half dead from starvation on one of the high plateaus–"

"Providence," Trascott broke in, "God's divine providence!"

"It could be nothing else," Rex agreed, "but Giraud's sacrifice was as beautiful as any act of Providence. He put me on his sled and drove straight for Dawson City and the surgeon, nourishing me all the way.

"To certain arrest?" cried Ainsworth, in profound astonishment. "He gave up his freedom for your sake?"

"Yes," was the answer. "The Mounted Police took him on sight. Giraud's doing three years for manslaughter–beastslaughter were truer–but he'll be rich when he comes out. I have taken good care of that."

"It was beautiful, beautiful!" murmured the curate, in rapture.

"That's the sort of men the great Northland breeds," said Britton. "They are

men to the very marrow! But in the matter of contrition and indemnification–"

"Indemnification only," objected Ainsworth, stolidly. "I fail to recognize any guilt."

"But still he must feel contrition," argued Trascott, kindly. "And I know what remorseful penance has been yours," he added, to Britton.

"Half the gold of that Five Mountain strike should have been Lessari's," Rex declared.

"Failing that, it belonged to his heirs," the lawyer supplemented.

"I took that view," said Britton. "I am glad you uphold it. Is that your opinion also, Trascott? I asked you both here for the purpose of obtaining advice, faultless and impersonal judgment."

"It is my opinion," the curate answered. "It was undoubtedly your duty to effect any reparation within your power."

"That I did," Rex assured him. "In Dawson I made enquiries and found that Lessari had a daughter. People told me he had no other relation in the world. Of course, my plan was one difficult of execution. I couldn't give the girl a fortune without courting investigation and suspicion. Happily, however, I had seen her before, without knowing her name, and I soon became acquainted with her.

"Lessari's daughter was something of an artist, and I soon saw that she had inherited the great gift, that she was a veritable genius with the brush. That gave me my cue. I simulated eager interest in her work, hired instructors for her, paid for her board at a minister's house, and gave her every comfort she could have. She accepted my aid on the proud condition that she should repay me on attaining sufficient eminence to sell her work.

"Of course I agreed. The thing went on that way for a little while, but not for long. People began to talk about my relations with the girl–"

Ainsworth's fist banged an interruption on the table.

"As they will, d–n them," he cried.

"I am positive that the tongue of Maud Morris started the gossip," Rex said. "It got to the ears of the girl at last. She confronted me with the scandal they were heaping on her pure name. There was but one course left for me then."

"Ah!" gasped Trascott, in a kind of dread.

"I offered her marriage!"

"Good God!" shouted Ainsworth, losing all his control.

"And the girl?" stammered the unstrung curate.

"She accepted!"

An oppressive silence followed. Trascott's trembling tones were the first to break it.

"You married her?" was his horrified question. "With the red gulf of her father's blood between you?"

"I did," said Britton, "but the marriage I proposed was not the ordinary one. I offered her my name and money, without stain, to shield her from scandalous gossips. We are joined by law, but we live separate lives, exist in divided courses, and occupy different apartments. The marriage has never been consummated, and it never will be!"

"But it is wrong–entirely wrong!" cried the curate. "There is a divine purpose of marriage, and it cannot be ignored. The arrangement you have effected is a sham and a monstrosity! You did what you conceived right, but what of this virgin's due? What of her inexpressibly lonely life? What of her ice-cold domestic existence? What of the vital need of motherhood?"

"Yes," said Ainsworth, in addition, "have you fulfilled your own scope of life, reached the far vision of your own ideal? You cannot do it this way! You have paid a heavy forfeit, Britton, but you are in the wrong."

There ensued a deep pause. Rex stared at his friends with unseeing eyes and did not answer.

"Your judgment was faulty," Trascott summed up. "Did any influence pervert it?"

"Possibly," Britton replied in a clear voice. "I loved her! And loving her, I have had to live with her, keeping up the impassable barrier which separates us."

"Heaven pity you," sympathized Ainsworth. "No man has done a more heroic thing."

"I asked you for this interview to-night in order to hear and abide by your decision," Rex said constrainedly. "What is that decision? If your opinions coincide, I want the verdict."

"You must tell your wife all you have told us," Trascott solemnly adjured. "Full confession is the only remedy."

Britton glanced at Ainsworth. The latter nodded his agreement.

"That is the inevitable course," the lawyer said. "With this confession will come the separation. No other way lies open."

Rex swept all the cartridges on the table before him into one heap. The movement seemed to indicate that he had gathered all the tangled threads of this tragedy and bound them into a single strong rope which would extract him from the difficulty.

"You agreed that my search for Lessari's heirs was laudable," he observed quietly. "Together you condemned my method of reparation. You both decide on confession and divorce. Your minds work wonderfully well together, and because your judgment is infallible I accept your verdict."

"You will tell your wife?" questioned Ainsworth, with relief.

"Remember that Corsican blood runs in her veins," Britton said, partly in after-thought. "She may possibly kill me. The story of her father's death by an un-

known hand was brought down by stampeders who followed me into Five Mountain Gulch on my second journey there after I had had my claims filed and had recovered from my starvation experience."

Trascott sat back in his chair again. "You can protect yourself," he declared earnestly. "You will not shirk. You must tell her."

Britton smiled with a very strange expression. "I have told her," he said.

"When?" cried both his friends.

"A few minutes ago," Rex answered. "I told her the truth for the first time, and I imparted the secret of my love for the first time!"

They regarded him incredulously.

"Where?" they asked, speaking again in chorus.

"Here, in this room!"

Trascott stared, but the lawyer, keener in perception, swiftly swept the room with his eyes, looking for a place of concealment. His glance reached the tapestry and he understood.

He stepped across the floor to the curtains and seized them with both hands.

"Is this the place of eavesdropping?" he cried in vexation, tossing the thick hangings apart.

Standing in the space of the double doorway, was Britton's wife.

"My friends," said Britton, "I thank you for letting her hear your just, impartial decision."

Mercia advanced to the centre of the room, while two of the three occupants regarded her astoundedly. Her cheeks were pale as whitest marble, and the pallor was accentuated by the pearly fairness of her arms and neck revealed by the evening dress which she still wore. She said nothing, but her eyes were fixed on those of her husband.

"This was prearrangement," snapped Ainsworth, his indignation overwhelming his astonishment.

"It was," Rex said. "I deemed it the only perfect way, and I ask your pardon for the advantage I took."

Trascott raised his palms helplessly, not knowing what to make of the trickery.

"He designed it for my benefit," Mercia said at last, in a measured tone, motioning to her husband. "I have heard everything!"

"Then it probably simplifies matters," the lawyer observed, cooling somewhat. "You will remember that your husband acted for what he thought was the best. The situation is an intolerable complexity. Be congratulated that its fibres are now laid bare! This marriage was a cruel error for both of you, and the error can be rectified to your mutual advantage."

"Not to my own," cried Britton, pained beyond measure. "I cherish the

present, but I accept the future at your dictation."

"Whose dictation?" Mercia asked quickly.

"Trascott's and Ainsworth's," her husband answered. "Two of the finest minds in England. They are in the very front rank of their professions, and they have held the scales for many unbalanced lives. Ours have been weighed with wisdom by their hands. Mercia, do you understand their judgment–what their verdict means?"

She clasped her hands in a pitiful gesture, and her composure seemed about to break in a storm of tears, but she quelled the emotion with royal courage.

"I understand," Mercia said in a strained whisper, "but–but I heard you say that you cherished the present!"

Britton's eyes lighted and then grew sad again.

"It is sweet," he declared, "compared with what the future void will be. But the true balance must be adjusted, Mercia. There are maelstroms in our social lives more dangerous than the whirlpools on Thirty Mile. Here we must travel with keenest care; we must guard our strength longer. No men know the routes better than Ainsworth and Trascott, and they have traced out our paths."

"In the separation, the–the divorce," interposed the lawyer, "you may of course command my services."

"Of course," murmured Britton, "it must be given into no other hands. You can accomplish an immediate, quiet dissolution without any scandal."

"My services are bound up with Ainsworth's," Trascott put in. "My assistance may be needed afterwards, in the matter of home or occupation for your wife, though a settlement could provide for her fully."

"Thank you, Trascott," said Rex. "Just transfer the comradeship I have loved to my–to Mercia, and I shall always be grateful!"

Britton looked at Mercia with the pangs of renunciation rending and torturing him.

"Are you prepared for what they say is inevitable?" he asked.

"Are you, yourself?" she questioned in turn.

"I–I think so," Rex said, with the feeling of a man pronouncing his own death-knell. "We cannot be mistaken in going by the two guiding institutions of the land."

"What ones?" Mercia asked.

"The Church and the Law! Their voices are immutable."

"Yet there is present another voice still more immutable, still more unerring," Mercia cried in the clear, bell-like tone Rex had first heard when she hailed him at Indian River in the far-away Yukon.

"And that?" His tone was intensely eager. He leaned from his seat.

"Is the voice of the human heart," she answered with eyes agleam. "Have

they considered it?"

"I do not know," said Britton, brokenly. Agonizing uncertainty choked him and muffled the beating of his heart.

"Should it not be included in the balancing?" Mercia persisted. She advanced another step and let her husband gaze into her great eyes as he would gaze into some holy sanctum. The two seemed drawn together, to the complete exclusion of Ainsworth and Trascott, the representative judges.

Causing a general start, the telephone bell whirred loudly in the library. Gubbins was in another part of the house. The bell buzzed frantically a second time, telling that the message must be insistent.

"Answer it, Trascott," Britton begged. "People do not speak at such an hour and in such a storm for a mere triviality."

"Certainly–by all means," said the curate, hurrying into the adjoining room.

Ainsworth, feeling his debarment from the physical presence of husband and wife, followed Trascott through the portières. Britton was quite alone with the daughter of the man whose violent end he had unwillingly compassed.

Mercia moved to the side of the table and Rex arose. Her fingers played with the long hunting-knife till they idly unsheathed it. Then her lithe figure straightened back like the return of a bow, and the great blade flashed above her head. The bright eyes were veiled.

Britton's face went rigid. He folded his arms over his breast.

"Strike!" he said. "I forgot that you are a Corsican."

One moment Mercia held her position, then dashed the weapon down so that it quivered with its point in the floor.

"Ah, no, Rex!" she cried proudly, "for I love you! It was but a supreme test. I have always loved you!"

Her husband staggered as from a forcible shock.

"You?" he cried. "Oh, this is too incredible!"

"Trascott spoke of a red gulf between us," said Mercia. "My heart has crossed it, and it is no more. Forgiveness follows penance!"

"You forgive? You love?" sobbed Britton. "Just God! The mighty strike!"

He caught her hands passionately and retained them, while the curate's re-entrance interrupted the climax of their lives.

"Leave us, Trascott," Britton begged. "Come back here in an hour."

"In an hour, yes," Trascott assented. "But do you believe in retribution? That message came from Rossland House. The carriage which James was driving to the town was struck by lightning. He was only stunned, but the Mahatma woman was killed. Do you believe in retribution?" Trascott vanished through the doorway, leaving the question with them.

"The circle is completed," Mercia whispered.

"Yes," said Britton, extending his arms, "and we belong to each other!"

An hour later, Ainsworth and the curate entered the gun-room. It presented a singularly deserted appearance, and the light burned dimly. An envelope directed to Trascott was pinned to the table with the sheath-knife.

"Hallo!" exclaimed the lawyer. "That's odd! What's in it?"

The curate hurriedly tore open the letter with trembling fingers. He drew forth a draft on Britton's bank; the figure two followed by six ciphers, sprawling across its face, made Trascott's eyes bulge out and forced his breath in a shrill hiss between his teeth.

"God bless my soul!" he cried, and dropped the draft in extreme agitation.

Ainsworth picked it up smartly and, turning it over, read aloud a line pencilled on the back.

It ran: "For your London Homes! Mercia and I are seeking another fortune, clean and untainted!"

The lawyer whirled on his heel and looked at the wall behind him. It was clean as a new sheet. The Klondike outfits and trappings were gone!

"By heaven, there's a man," he vehemently asserted. "A man, Trascott! I'll drink a toast to him."

Ainsworth seized the decanter and poured himself a glass, holding it aloft.

"To the Stampeder!" he cried.

"Amen!" said Trascott

THE END.

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